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ONLINE CERTIFICATE IN SOCIAL INNOVATION: Enabling Diverse Students to Go from “I Care” to “I Can”

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurs aim to solve persistent social and environmental problems by creating high-impact organizations. Designing entrepreneurial solutions to complex problems requires the application of systems thinking, leadership, design thinking, and business acumen. However, these skills are not quickly or easily gained in the normal course of entrepreneurship. Social innovators worldwide typically work in isolation and with little preparation, often not realizing there are disciplined approaches to creating and deploying effective social enterprises and that there are thousands of others like them. Recognizing these realities, the Portland State University (PSU) School of Business Administration’s Business of Social Innovation Certificate reaches diverse, impact-driven future leaders and teaches them to use applied learning to build their capacity as effective changemakers. Accredited to offer both academic (for credit) and professional certificates and delivered primarily online, it is believed to be the first joint program of its kind.

Introduction

Around the world, people of all ages, fields of study, and beliefs are longing to steer their lives with purpose toward making a difference. This demand is documented among students, mid-career professionals, and lifelong learners: according to a Net Impact survey, fully 65% of graduate and undergraduate university students said they “expect to make a positive social or environmental difference in the world at some point through their work” and 53% of workers of all ages said that a job where they could make an impact was important or essential to their happiness (Zukin and Szeltner 2012). Similarly, Encore.org¹ and MetLife found that 31 million Americans 44-70 are interested in an “encore career”—late-career or post-retirement work—and 70% of them “say it is very important to them personally to leave the world a better place” (Civic Ventures 2011).

Employers are also recognizing the value of this approach. In a scan of literature on skills associated with successful “changemakers”—individuals who generated and implemented new approaches for positive social change—researchers at the University of Northampton in the UK identified a core set of changemaking talents that also had significant overlap with skills in high demand by employers (Appendix 1) (Rivers, Armellini, and Nie 2015). Organizations of all kinds are increasingly seeking employees that understand not only how to create financial value for shareholders, but social and environmental value for stakeholders as well.

Universities around the world have begun to meet student interest in changemaking by introducing curricula on social change theories and best practices for social innovation. However,

1 Formerly Civic Ventures.



these offerings are seldom diversified beyond young, degree-seeking students. Crafting programs that also meet the needs and recognize the unique constraints of mid-career professionals and late-career entrepreneurs not only serves a more diverse audience, but also enriches the experience of degree-seeking students when they are integrated into the same educational experiences.

This paper will review the design, launch, and outcomes of Portland State University's online, joint academic and professional Business of Social Innovation Certificate. Starting with program origins, the paper will continue through design methodology and philosophy, program curriculum, marketing strategy, and evaluation methods. Finally, program growth and preliminary outcomes will be reviewed, concluding with lessons learned and next steps.

Origins of the Program

Portland State University (PSU) has been internationally recognized for its leadership in teaching and enabling social innovation and social entrepreneurship, earning Ashoka U's "Changemaker Campus" designation in 2012. Ashoka U is the higher education initiative of Ashoka, the world's largest network of social entrepreneurs (Ashoka U n.d.). Social innovation is "A novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals" (Phills Jr., Deiglmeier, and Miller 2008). Social entrepreneurs:

play the role of change agents in the social sector, by adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value), recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission, engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning, acting boldly without being limited by resources

currently in hand, and exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created (Dees 2001).

Framing knowledge as a pathway for social innovation and social entrepreneurship has become a cornerstone of PSU's curricular and co-curricular approach, leveraging a history of community engagement and support from PSU's Institute for Sustainable Solutions, a hub for campus-wide, sustainability-related research, curriculum development, and campus initiatives. In the School of Business Administration (SBA), social innovation and social entrepreneurship education and experiences are led by Impact Entrepreneurs, a program with a mission to "unleash the promise of business for social impact" (PSU School of Business Administration n.d.). Since its founding in 2010, Impact Entrepreneurs has provided social entrepreneurship courses, training, and incubation to hundreds of enrolled students and employees at partner organizations from around the world, but it was clear from conversations and research that there were many more people interested than could be served through face-to-face programs.

On the heels of PSU's selection as a Changemaker Campus, Impact Entrepreneurs sought to scale its impact by offering a certificate program online. The vision was to make the certificate available to anyone, anywhere. As a largely self-funded program, Impact Entrepreneurs had to be practical while working toward its vision of global accessibility and reach. As planned at that time, the certificate would be bootstrapped using retained revenues and focus initially on professionals, who represented an untapped market and could afford the fees necessary to create a financially sustainable approach. As a team of two staff members and a contractor worked on designing this program, a new funding opportunity entered the picture.

In 2013, Portland State University launched reTHINK: PSU, an initiative designed to address challenges PSU faces as an institution of higher education and to catalyze internal innovation (PSU Office of Academic Innovation n.d.). reTHINK: PSU “strives to deliver an education that serves more students with better outcomes while containing costs through curricular innovation, community engagement, and effective use of technology” (PSU Office of Academic Innovation n.d.). The “Provost’s Challenge” was the first project of the reTHINK: PSU effort and used a crowdsourcing model to identify, select, and fund innovative and collaborative proposals. The certificate concept was perfectly positioned to vie for Provost’s Challenge funding, and after nine months of presentations and proposals by Impact Entrepreneurs Director Cindy Cooper and Program Manager Jacen Greene (the authors of this paper), Impact Entrepreneurs was awarded a grant of nearly \$240,000 to design, develop, and launch the Business of Social Innovation Certificate as a joint academic and professional program.

Design Process

With the grant in hand in fall 2013, Impact Entrepreneurs moved quickly to design, develop, and launch the first certificate course in four months to meet the Provost’s Challenge start deadline. In parallel, Cooper and Greene proposed the new courses, including syllabi, and the format of the new certificate for approval first to the undergraduate and graduate curriculum committees in the SBA, and then to the PSU Faculty Senate, making suggested adjustments at each step. A regional accreditation body, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, gave final approval of the program within nine months from the start of the proposal process.

Impact Entrepreneurs employed design-thinking principles in creating the program, engaging more than 100 individuals in its conceptualization. Using surveys,

interviews, and group design charettes, the team tapped the wisdom of students, funders, university administrators, faculty, staff, social entrepreneurs, and even a corporate social intrapreneur. Topics explored included content, pedagogy, course length, delivery format, and pricing.

The approved certificate comprises three fully online, four-credit, ten-week courses and one accelerated field study practicum (Appendix 2), which can be taken as a hybrid course in Portland or through a study abroad experience. Degree seekers in undergraduate and graduate programs take certificate courses alongside members of the community. The certificate is fully accredited, and degree seekers can earn an academic certificate on their degree, while others earn a professional certificate of completion. More than 80 students enrolled in certificate courses in the pilot year, with a mix of roughly one-third undergraduates, one-third graduate students, and one-third non-degree students.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

In designing the curriculum, the Impact Entrepreneurs team drew on years of experience teaching and practicing social innovation and social entrepreneurship concepts. They also worked in consultation with leading experts such as the late J. Gregory Dees, who helped launch social entrepreneurship programs at Harvard, Stanford, and Duke universities, and Sutia “Kim” Alter, a social enterprise consultant and university instructor who was one of the earliest academic fellows at Oxford’s Skoll Centre. Designed to deliver an effective education in identified skills for successfully effecting change, the certificate aims to greatly enhance an individual’s likelihood of making world-changing ideas into reality while building individual capacity for purpose-based leadership to live a more thoughtful and fulfilling life—to “lead self to lead change.”

Through asynchronous lecture and guest interview videos developed by program faculty, as well as carefully curated videos, case studies, books, and articles, students learn best practices and fundamental skills in social innovation, social entrepreneurship, and business and nonprofit management. Students are required to participate in online discussion forums throughout each course, with a new prompt selected by instructors each week. They enjoy opportunities to meet with global subject matter experts through webinars, events, and site visits, thereby building social capital and networks while learning how to launch a new initiative or venture in a safe and supportive environment difficult to find outside of the classroom experience.

The program also requires students to pair up as peer mentors, meeting either in-person or by video chat several times in each course. The focus is less on making a match based on commonalities or other criteria, and more on practicing effective listening and supportive coaching. Peer mentoring has been demonstrated to improve academic performance, retention, civic engagement, and personal development in similar initiatives at PSU (University Studies 2011). Through peer mentoring, certificate students learn from each other and build habits for resilience and problem-solving that can help them as future entrepreneurs or in any career they pursue.

Each course in the program is highly applied, requiring students to select a social or environmental problem and design an effective solution, business model, financing plan, legal structure, marketing plan, operational plan, and pitch presentation in support of their evolving idea. Applying principles of lean entrepreneurship, students refine, pivot, and expand their concepts based on what they learn from faculty and from grading and feedback given by instructors and peer mentors. Students who complete the certificate are given preferential admission to Impact Entrepreneurs' other programs

and services, including a Social Innovation Incubator that provides tailored consulting.

Multidisciplinary Instruction and Enrollment

Solutions to so-called “wicked problems” that social entrepreneurs endeavor to tackle are never simple, nor do they reside within singular domains. With this understanding, the certificate team not only designed courses with a diverse team of multidisciplinary faculty and experts, but also delivered courses with instructors and speakers from across disciplines (Appendix 3). Courses and field studies are co-taught with instructors from the SBA, from other PSU schools and colleges, and from outside the university. This diversity in instruction provides students with multiple lenses onto social and environmental problems and solution frameworks, exposing them to the real-world diversity of stakeholder engagement necessary for successful social entrepreneurship.

Likewise, the concurrent enrollment of undergraduates, graduates, and professionals, coupled with a peer-mentoring model, enables students to engage in discussion and collaboration across ages, backgrounds, and areas of expertise. In the inaugural year of the program, certificate students ranged in age from their teens to their 60s, and included the founders of local foundations and international NGOs, faculty from PSU and Universidad Católica del Norte in Chile, and undergraduate and graduate students from multiple PSU schools and colleges, as well as other institutions. More than two-thirds of the pilot year cohort enrolled from outside the SBA, where the certificate is housed (Appendix 4).

Along with achieving key learning outcomes, drawing in a diverse, intergenerational, and international student cohort with eclectic perspectives was a key goal of the program. In order to avoid the confrontation of complex problems in isolation, engaging with peers who embody all axes of diversity,

while working on actual concepts for new social ventures, provides the best possible experience of problem solving and social entrepreneurship. Indeed, graduate students surveyed anonymously after taking certificate courses identified mixed cohorts as one of the most positive aspects of their experience.

Marketing

Effectively marketing the new program was essential to attracting a diverse and qualified group of students. While the grant was instrumental in designing, developing, and delivering a high-quality and unique program in four months, the team was not able to use grant funding to advertise the program. Thus, the team had the opportunity to be entrepreneurial in the outreach process, using a combination of low-cost methods to identify and communicate with prospective students.

Marketing communications tactics included:

- An engaging program website with course details, a short video about the program, clear links to registration, and compiled enrollment and payment information from numerous other PSU websites and sources in one location: www.changemakercertificate.com.
- An email newsletter with a registration form available on the course website.
- Emails to partners within PSU and around the world with easy to share flyers and program blurbs.
- Social media marketing through Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn accounts.
- Speaking at both local and global events, such as Trading at the River, the Ashoka U Exchange, and GoGreen PDX, as well as visiting classes at PSU and in other nearby colleges.

Evaluation and Impact Measurement

The team created and utilized several feedback loops to ensure that student feedback was collected, evaluated, and incorporated in a timely and effective manner.

All courses at PSU are evaluated through anonymous student evaluations at the end of each quarter, but the automatic systems used to distribute these to students and collect results do not include professionals. In addition, evaluations focus on content and instruction, but registration processes, delivery platforms, course format and length, and customer service are not covered. To supplement these evaluations, the team created a mid-course, anonymous formative assessment survey to cover questions not included in the evaluation and to ensure that professionals had an opportunity to voice their opinions.

Course evaluations and the mid-term survey, however, give only an incomplete picture of the entire program experience. Many students take only one or two certificate courses as optional electives, and therefore don't complete the entire program. To ensure that the overall experience of the certificate meets goals for academic and programmatic quality, each certificate graduate is interviewed one-on-one after they complete the program. Although a standard set of questions is used, this also enables additional discussion around any outstanding items or suggestions and an opportunity to follow up with the graduate regarding their next steps and additional needs or to solicit a quote regarding the program.

To measure individual impact, the team chose to attempt to track students longitudinally using a summative survey on their confidence and mindsets as changemakers. Every new student is asked to complete a survey, which is not anonymous. They are then given the same survey after completing the program, to track their self-identified progress against changemaker traits identified in academic research and along milestones for their proposed social ventures. A planned future avenue for research is to compare these students with students who have taken individual courses but not the entire program,

or with students who have not taken any certificate courses, to determine the overall impact of the program in creating future changemakers and social entrepreneurs.

Growth and Outcomes

Within two years of the launch of the first certificate course, 117 students had taken at least one course in the program. Enrollment increased more than 70% between the first and second years, and is on track for an additional jump of more than 100% as it moves through its third year. Representative of the intentional diversity of participants, more than 60% of students have enrolled from outside the program's home in the SBA.

While some students are not ready to launch a new venture at this stage of their lives, and others learn through the certificate courses that their concept may not be viable, they still learn valuable changemaking skills that can be used to shape their personal and professional journeys. For students who will continue on to launch their concepts, or are working to improve extant programs and ventures, the certificate program not only teaches them essential skills and tools, but connects them to additional resources they can utilize after completing the program.

Certificate graduates receive preferential selection for Impact Entrepreneurs' Social Innovation Incubator (SII), where they receive customized mentoring and other benefits from Impact Entrepreneurs' partnerships, including access to zero-interest loans through Kiva Zip and eligibility to apply for free legal support through the Thomson Reuters Foundation's TrustLaw program. Through guest speakers and coursework, graduates are also introduced to a network of resource providers and opportunities both at PSU and in the local community. Two graduates of the certificate entered the SII in 2014, and a student in the 2015 class won second place in a university-wide pitch competition. Other participants and graduates

have successfully launched new ventures in the program, or used the certificate to design and launch intrapreneurial endeavors at existing organizations (Appendix 5).

Through impact surveys, course evaluations, and individual interviews, Impact Entrepreneurs has found that the certificate features that students most appreciate are the accessibility of online courses, the ability to work on their own concepts in course assignments, and the chance to learn alongside students of various ages, stages, and backgrounds.

Student comments reveal more qualitative aspects of the course experience, as shown below:

- "This program has been inspirational in finding like-minded people and so important in pushing students to learn about the real-world application of the lessons being taught."
- "This is one of the best classes I've taken at PSU, and far and away the best online class I've ever taken."
- "The program was an inspiring, positively challenging, practical experience that provided tools, insights and resources to convert ideas to sustainable actions that drive change."
- "I absolutely loved this class. This had more immediate impact on my life than any other class I've ever taken and has connected me to so many different people. I've been introduced to new ideas that have reshaped HOW I go about my daily work. I can't say enough about how much this has changed my thinking. All in all, an incredible, life-changing, well-designed course."
- "This was the course I needed to go from 'I care' to 'I can.'"

Lessons Learned

While the lessons learned by the certificate team are numerous and ongoing, four key items are especially notable:

1. The knowledge gap between some students and instructors/experts has proven to be smaller than expected. Some “students” are successful social entrepreneurs in their own right, and bring unique and valuable insights to classroom discussion. The requirement for students to work on their own concept, and conduct applied research while engaging directly with stakeholders and customers, means that they develop a depth of expertise in the topic over the course of the program. Through the peer mentoring system, students of different ages and backgrounds share expertise and support one another.
2. Diversity of all types—age, gender identity, sexual identity, national origin, race and ethnicity, life and work experience, ability, etc.—enhances the course experience and helps students better achieve learning outcomes. For example, nearly 87% of certificate students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that mixing undergraduates, graduates, and professionals in the same courses enriched their learning experience. Students receive tremendous benefit from working with older professionals or peers from other cultures and backgrounds in exploring social and environmental problems and solutions. In addition, diversity spurs improved content and delivery. Developing accommodations for a single group, such as asynchronous video lectures for working professionals or written video narration for non-native English speakers, creates add-on benefits for every student.
3. Requiring students to focus on a problem area of their own choosing, and to develop and refine their own concept for a potential solution, helps them tap into intrinsic motivation, discover a sense of purpose in their career goals, and create relevance in their education by directly linking business and social innovation

theory to personal interests. The applied nature of assignments means that students won't find answers in a book, that experts and community members become important co-creators of their educational experience, and that the instructor doesn't always have the “right” answer—if there even is one. Students must practice self-reliance, curiosity, and empathy to succeed, all of which are critical skills in modern careers.

4. Online programs must be developed with constant iteration and improvement in mind. The rapidly-changing nature of online learning platforms and systems, maturing student expectations surrounding technology-enabled experiences, and relative newness of research into online pedagogy mean that best practices are not static. All of the certificate courses exceed the Quality Matters rubric, a set of standards originally developed by Maryland Online to provide assurance in online education. However, instructors and team members must still engage in a process of continuous learning, feedback gathering, and improvement to ensure program success.

Conclusion

Social entrepreneurs adopt a mission and use entrepreneurial approaches to achieve, measure, and increase their impact. This framework to create positive change can be applied not only in developing a new venture, but to improve the practices of existing business, government, academic, nonprofit, and religious organizations. To successfully prepare students to become changemakers who create such positive impact requires a new approach to teaching such topics, one that marries social and emotional skills with so-called “hard” skills. All too often, social entrepreneurship courses and professional development programs focus solely on the ideation process or business model generation. As a result, the

social entrepreneurship landscape is littered with failed ideas and ventures. Success can be elusive when individuals are not primed as whole leaders, sensitive to the role that personal characteristics can have in aiding or hindering the impact of their work.

The program designers believed that one must “lead self to lead change.” To that end, the Business of Social Innovation Certificate emphasizes student-led inquiry, community-based learning, and the teaching and practice of social-emotional skills, matched with academic theory and practitioner tools. Designing the program with the input of the widest possible set of interested individuals, and enabling program access to the most diverse set of students, is essential to effectively delivering courses utilizing those approaches. Student feedback has shown the initial success of the model, but only by continually learning, adapting, and empathizing with the students and communities served can the certificate team continue to improve the program and create real and lasting value for students.

Appendix 1: Changemaker Attributes and Relation to Employability*

CHANGEMAKER ATTRIBUTE	EMPLOYABILITY ATTRIBUTE?
Self-confidence	
Perseverance	
Internal locus of control	Yes
Self-awareness	Yes
Action orientation	Yes
Innovation and creativity	
Critical thinking	Yes
Empathy	
Reflective	Yes
Communication	Yes
Emotional and social intelligence	
Problem solving	Yes
Leader	Yes
Values-driven	Yes

*Adapted from Rivers, Armellini, and Nie 2015

Appendix 2: Certificate Courses and Associated Learning Outcomes (LO)

MGMT 421/521s: Design Thinking for Social Innovation. Greene and Ferry.

LO1	Understand foundational definitions in social innovation and social entrepreneurship and how they relate to the student's concept.
LO2	Analyze a social or environmental problem of their choice through expert interviews, secondary research, and stakeholder engagement.
LO3	Create and evaluate a proposed solution to a social or environmental problem using best practices in design.
LO4	Develop and demonstrate improved self-awareness, clarity of purpose, ability to seek and respond effectively to feedback, and empathic leadership skills.

MGMT 422/522s: Money Matters for Social Innovation. Greene and Granholm.

LO1	Apply lean entrepreneurship tools, including the Business Model Canvas and Customer Development Process, to design a business model for their venture.
LO2	Estimate the market size and social opportunity size of their proposed social venture, incorporating risk analysis and the competitive landscape.
LO3	Evaluate legal entities (nonprofit and for-profit) and develop a hypothesis as to which one they should adopt; develop a plan for managing their intellectual property.
LO4	Determine which sources and types of funding are appropriate for their model and create forward-looking financial statements.
LO5	Develop the capacity for self-regulation and relationship management.

MGMT 423/523s: Storytelling and Impact Measurement for Social Innovation. Cooper, Yuthas, and Greene.

LO1	Identify a leadership competency based on personal and career reflection; practice and improve that competency.
LO2	Craft your personal story and organizational story into a pitch to communicate your venture's value proposition to a specific target audience.
LO3	Develop an effective impact measurement outline using leading frameworks for social and environmental impact analysis and reporting.
LO4	Adapt and deploy strategies to successfully scale or amplify the impact of social ventures.

MGMT 409/509s: Field Study/Practicum (Portland). Cooper and Greene.

LO1	Create an operations plan to guide the management of their proposed social venture.
LO2	Reflect on principles of leadership and how they can be used to further their own personal and professional success.
LO3	Interact with and learn from successful social entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs and be able to understand and synthesize what they have learned.

LO1	Understand common definitions, applications, and approaches to social entrepreneurship and social innovation.
LO2	Reflect on their own potential as changemakers and social entrepreneurs as shaped by their experience during the trip.
LO3	Synthesize skills and mindsets they have learned through interaction with social entrepreneurs to design effective solutions for social problems.
LO4	Have an appreciation for the unique culture and history of India, as well as the challenges and opportunities of social entrepreneurship in developing countries.

Appendix 3: Instructors and Speakers

Current and Past Faculty/Instructors

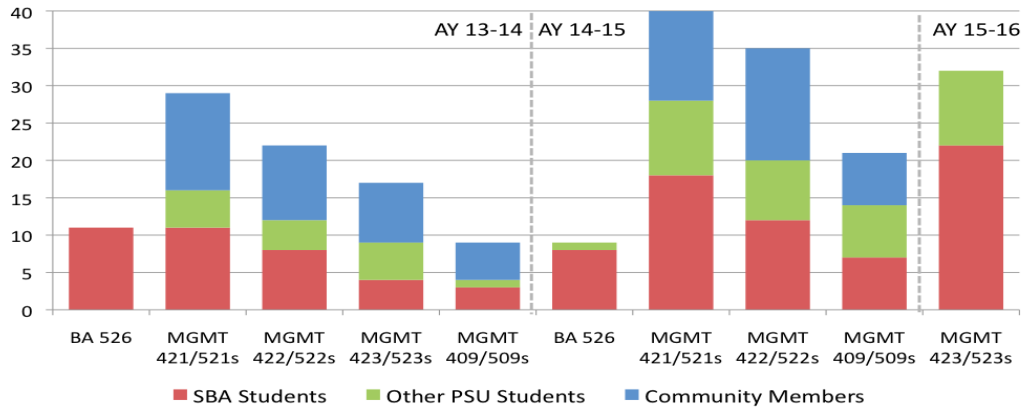
- Kim Alter, Founder and Managing Director, Virtue Ventures
- Cindy Cooper, Director, Impact Entrepreneurs, PSU School of Business Administration
- Todd Ferry, Faculty Fellow at the Center for Public Interest Design, PSU School of Architecture
- Gudrun Granholm, Faculty, OHSU/PSU Healthcare MBA; Founder, Box One
- Jacen Greene, Program Manager, Impact Entrepreneurs, PSU School of Business Administration
- Carolyn McKnight, MBA Leadership Program Director Emeritus, PSU School of Business Administration
- Tichelle Sorensen, PSU MBA Director & Faculty, School of Business Administration
- Kristi Yuthas, Professor, PSU School of Business Administration
- Current and Past Course Speakers
- Travis Bell, Adjunct Faculty, PSU School of Architecture, Portland State University
- Tim Clark, Author, Business Model You
- Max Holfert, Senior Loan Officer, Mercy Corps NW
- Kazi Huque, CEO of Grameen Intel
- Theodore Khoury, Assistant Professor of Management, PSU School of Business Administration
- Margarete Leite, Assistant Professor, PSU School of Architecture
- Patrick Maloney, impact fund consultant & manager
- Sergio Palleroni, Center for Public Interest Design Co-founder & Director, PSU School of Architecture
- Christina Sass, Co-founder and COO, Andela
- Sara Weihmann, Social Enterprise Director, New Avenues for Youth
- B.D. Wortham-Galvin, Assistant Professor, PSU School of Architecture
- Experts from IDEO.org and Ashoka Changemakers
- Site Visit Speakers (Portland, 2014)
- Rob Bart, Founder, Forge
- Clay Cooper, Director of Social Enterprises, Central City Concern
- Kazi Huque, CEO, Grameen Intel
- DeeAnn Jurgens, COO, Sustainable Harvest
- Alexander Nicholas, Program Officer, The Lemelson Foundation
- Scott Onder, Senior Advisor for Social Ventures, Mercy Corps
- Amelia Pape, Founder, My Street Grocery
- Amy Pearl, Founder, Hatch
- Travis Pearson, CEO, DePaul Industries
- Andrew Volkman, Lending Program Manager, Mercy Corps NW

Appendix 4: Enrollment

Total course enrollment Fall 2013 – Fall 2015: **222**

Total students: **89**

Average enrollment increase, year 1 to year 2: **71%**



Appendix 5: Selected Certificate Participants

- Gina Condon, founder of Construct Foundation, which supports innovation in education. Construct Foundation joined the PSU Social Innovation Incubator in 2014.
- Genevieve Martin, executive director of the Dave's Killer Bread Foundation. The new foundation was designed using the certificate program and launched in 2015.
- David Oh, founder of Early Childhood Huddle, which provides training to early childhood educators. Early Childhood Huddle won second place in the 2015 PSU Pitch Fest and was officially launched shortly afterward.
- Deidre Schuetz, co-founder of Lanyi Fan, an inclusive development nonprofit operating in the US and Senegal. Lanyi Fan joined the PSU Social Innovation Incubator in 2014.

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