



Earl Martin Phalen, Social Entrepreneur in Residence at the [University of North Carolina's CUBE](#)

Earl Martin Phalen is one of the nation's leading social entrepreneurs and education reformers. He has dedicated the past 20 years of his life to expanding the life opportunities of children through learning and academic engagement. His organizations, [Summer Advantage USA](http://summeradvantage.org/) (<http://summeradvantage.org/>) and the [George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academies](http://www.phalenacademies.org/) (<http://www.phalenacademies.org/>) have made such significant transformative changes to educate children and youth across the Northeast that President Obama has even modeled federal legislation after his summer learning program.

Phalen is an Ashoka, an Echoing Green, and a Mind Trust Fellow as well as a three-time recipient of Fast Company's Social Capitalist Award, and he was awarded the President's Service Award by President Clinton. For his exceptional contributions in the education sector, Phalen has earned recognition from numerous major media players including MSNBC, NBC Nightly News, ABC News, Time Magazine, and BET, and has also appeared on TEDx.

Phalen is no stranger to the urge to want to found a social venture and make an impact in the world, while still attending classes in college. While a law student, he founded what started out as a community service project: Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL), at first serving 20 scholars with an operating budget of \$12,000 and now a nationwide nonprofit organization with a budget of \$27 million serving 15,000 scholars.

Earl Martin Phalen provides expert feedback to CUBE teams on their ventures during his visits to UNC.

Social entrepreneurship according to a social entrepreneur

1. CUBE: How do you define social entrepreneurship? How does CUBE help illustrate your idea of social entrepreneurship?

A social entrepreneur is a leader of a venture, for profit or nonprofit, that is working to provide a social good for society that can range from education, environment, criminal justice, clean water, pure energy, working with the elderly, and more. Social entrepreneurs focus on a double bottom line, making a dramatic impact that creates a social good for those they serve and on running a viable and sustainable venture. The CUBE is a tremendous resource for students who want to be or who are social entrepreneurs, because they provide a physical space for working on your venture as well as resources that are critical to a start-up like strategic planning, legal support, marketing and PR, and more.

Career development and skills

2. CUBE: What kind of talents do students going into social enterprise careers need? For example, when you hire at your organizations, what skill sets and attitudes are ideal? What recommendations might you have for students applying to these jobs?

Students going into a social entrepreneurial careers need strong communication skills, both written and oral; a superior work ethic; and the ability to comfortably research, learn, and try new skills.



I also look for students who graduate with honors, on the Dean's List, Magna Cum Laude, or Summa Cum Laude. This demonstrates the ability of an individual come into college, set a goal, and even with all sorts of distractions (sports, friends, parties, procrastination, etc.) have the focus and drive to achieve one of their primary objectives. Obviously college is also about growing socially and emotionally, and making social connections, but I look for someone who knows how to achieve what they desire.

One key piece of advice for graduates who are looking to serve in this field is to have humility. I've had two personal assistants and one full-time volunteer intern who came directly out of college and because they were willing to be the Assistant to the CEO, which may not seem like a sexy title, they had access to high level organization information and meetings; learned how to effectively manage a governing board; were part of a senior management team; and took on projects that ranged from learning how to fundraising by writing million-dollar grants, to learning human resources and management skills by assisting with recruitment, to learning how to develop employees by putting on professional training events for hundreds of employees around the country. In doing so, their diverse skillsets, intelligence, and exposure allowed them within four years to become a National Director of Training, National Director of Technology, and Chief Development Officer. One was a graduate from Princeton, one was from Harvard, and one was from UC Berkeley; all of them had graduated with honors. If they didn't have the humility to take an assistant position that may have seemed "beneath them," they might have gotten a better title but they would not have had this experience and exposure or have built my confidence in promoting them so rapidly to senior management positions.

3. CUBE: How does CUBE foster these attributes? What kind of competencies does CUBE instill?

There are many ways to learn, including learning from reading and research, learning from mentorship or advice, and learning by doing. I think the mix of all three of these ways to acquire knowledge is critical, but one of the most significant is learning through experience. CUBE is a great resource because it provides best practices around how to build an intervention. CUBE staff are tremendous sounding board for ideas, feedback, coaching, and if there's ever an area where they don't have expertise they are connectors who help their organizations connect with other individuals, peer groups, etc. The CUBE also offers hands-on experiences like the "pitch competitions" and others, and it supports individuals in rolling out their ideas, executing, having a place to come back to reflect on successes or failures, and then getting back out and executing again and trying to make one's venture come to life.

Expertise and leadership as SEiR

4. CUBE: What are some of the biggest tips you have for young social entrepreneurs?

I have the following advice for young social entrepreneurs:

1) Research your problem and truly understand the root causes of the issue that you're trying to address. 2) While many may encourage you to come up with something unique, really take the time to understand other organizations that are providing similar services, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and be honest in determining if you really are hitting a niche or if you'd be better off joining forces with an existing organization that has a similar focus. 3) If you choose to launch a new venture, commit to **both** understanding and developing an amazing program and developing a financial plan that will ensure long-term organizational health and sustainability. 4) It is easier to pursue your idea as a student in a student organization, and if you deem that in the future you will roll it out to become an



independent nonprofit, I recommend several tips for creating a powerful nonprofit in [this article](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/earl-martin-phalen/3-tips-for-creating-a-pow b 861069.html) with the Huffington Post (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/earl-martin-phalen/3-tips-for-creating-a-pow b 861069.html>).

5. CUBE: Conversely, what are some of the biggest causes of failure?

Working in this sector is incredibly hard. One of the biggest causes of failure in social entrepreneurs is a lack of persistence. Another failure is a lack of planning. Good planning includes understanding the community in which you want to serve, deeply understanding the needs within that community, and truly understanding what program or services would be best received within the community. I see a third main cause of failure in a lack of understanding one's business model; by business model, I mean determining how much funding is needed to start and then sustain the organization, understanding cash flow needs, and having a financial model that will not only be sustainable but will also be scalable.

6. CUBE: Part of being a social entrepreneur-in-residence involves mentoring students. What are the top tips you have been giving to UNC student social entrepreneurs?

Many of the top tips that I'm giving I've referenced above, but in addition to my previous comments I would encourage social entrepreneurs to know themselves. Particularly, spending time answering the question "what is my purpose in life?" Not all ventures have to be aligned with your personal mission, but if you get clear on what you are here to contribute, the path to achieve becomes much clearer and it helps you persist during the hard times on your journey. It will also help in defining whether you want to be part of a student organization, part of a social entrepreneurial venture for your career, or whether you want to launch your own venture.

7. CUBE: What has been your favorite part of being SEiR?

I'm not sure if you remember the scene in Rocky III, after Rocky loses to Clubber Lang he goes back to Apollo's gym, back to the beginning, and sees the hunger in the eyes of boxers who are training to be champions; it's called the eye of the tiger. I love the hunger, the passion, the business acumen, the intelligence, and the drive of the organizational leaders that I have met at UNC. I've traveled across many campuses and I've worked with tens of thousands of college students, and I've never seen such a concentrated group of young, hungry, and driven leaders. It's inspirational for me and it makes me very hopeful about our country's future.

The university's role in the future of social innovation

8. CUBE: What is the CUBE's best asset? What is your favorite part?

The CUBE has many tremendous assets. First, CUBE's leaders Mathilde and Richard are extraordinary individuals who have impacted the globe in their nonprofit careers, and they are incredible partners, mentors, coaches and supporters for young leaders. A second key asset is the physical space itself. The ability to come into a physical space to work on your venture, be around other leaders who are working on their ventures, and to be part of a community where you can be inspired by and learn from a peer group – you might be strong in several areas, but another organization may be strong in an area that you're weak in – is an incredible asset. Another huge challenge in starting a social venture is getting some of the back office services that organizations need, like strategic planning, legal, marketing, and



financial planning. The CUBE is a great hub for nonprofit leaders to access these resources. Finally, providing great access to guest speakers and workshops helps UNC students further evolve their ventures. The CUBE does a tremendous job supporting leaders who want to make a difference in the world!

9. CUBE: Can you comment on CUBE's model? Why host a social innovation incubator in a higher ed setting?

Coming off the economic downturn that we recently experienced, I think more and more young people are comparing the value of higher education against the cost of higher education. While many graduates will go on and get a job in an existing organization, the CUBE provides individuals with phenomenal support in obtaining the skills, platform, and experience they need to create their own careers and their own pathway. And, whether they launch an independent venture or go into an existing institution, the social entrepreneurial skills these students have developed will be invaluable to their future professional success.

Space, capacity-building, and mentoring

10. CUBE: How important are physical—and creative—spaces such as CUBE to the success of entrepreneurial initiatives?

Having a centralized space for young social entrepreneurs is critical to the success of their work. The business of starting a nonprofit can be very isolating, and the journey can feel lonely even if you're doing it with a small team. Having a communal space to work with others who are at different stages of their entrepreneurial journeys is so important. In a way, it's like having a gym for entrepreneurs. If you work out alone, you sometimes get tired and don't want to push. If you see the people next to you and in front of you going hard at the gym, and a coach is guiding and pushing you, it helps you push through.

Learning in a community like the CUBE is also so important to one's development as a young entrepreneur because it provides a space for receiving critical feedback about one's ideas; provides young social entrepreneurs with the resources that enable them to move faster and more effectively through several learning curves; connects social entrepreneurs with opportunities to access critical seed funding; and more.

The importance of networks

11. CUBE: How have networks helped you along the way as a social entrepreneur? Do you have any tips for young social entrepreneurs at UNC?

When I started my first venture, there was no location like the CUBE. I was fortunate, however, to be able to get together for lunch every six to eight weeks with two other social entrepreneurs who were in the process of starting their venture. Having that support group to connect on the successes and on the challenges we faced was so incredibly important in helping me stick with my venture, remain resolute in my belief, and persist despite the challenges.

I attended Harvard Law School, and their university network was also central to my organization's success. I was passionate about helping children, but I did not know much about education and so I reached out to Dr. Robert Peterkin at the school of education. He took me under his wing and taught me



about selecting the right curriculum and staff, providing professional development, what the research-based program elements would help our children most, and about evaluation and assessment so that we could honestly assess the impact of our program. I also was fortunate to work with Bayley Mason, who was the head of Harvard's billion dollar fundraising campaign, and he taught me the fundamentals of fundraising. Professor Charles Ogletree at the law school helped me with community mobilization and organization. And, students at the business school used one of their classes to help build our business plan. We would not have succeeded without this network.

UNC has such a powerful network, and UNC, the CUBE, and 1789 Venture Lab have organized resources so that a truly hungry social entrepreneur has everything that they need to succeed. I've not seen another place like UNC in this regard.

My final tip for social entrepreneurs at UNC is to take advantage of this incredible wealth of resources and to boldly after your dreams and your purpose in life.