



Taking exception to exceptionalism

By **Eric Friedenwald-Fishman** | Metropolitan Group Creative Director/President

Don't get me wrong. I want my kids to be exceptional. I want them to attend an exceptional school. I want my favorite theater to cast exceptional actors and our sports teams to have exceptional athletes. I am convinced that free enterprise and the entrepreneurial frame of American progress thrive and advance based on the innovation, vision, and talents of exceptional people.

However, I am concerned that, in our collective excitement about the exceptional, we are losing our vital expectations of quality and access for all. Our concept of exceptionalism creates benefits for all, but only when it is linked to our commitment to a level playing field and a social contract that assumes a baseline of quality and opportunity. I believe our focus on exceptionalism¹ alone (without the distribution and scale of baseline expectations for all) may contribute to increased disparity in our society.

To put this in simple terms: I want my kids to have exceptional teachers, but I don't want my children's exceptional teachers to be the exception. As a citizen of a democracy, I need every child to have a quality education. I want every child to have a really good teacher. I worry if my child's excellent teacher is the exception. Just turn on the news, and you will see

candidates and pundits on the right bolstering "American exceptionalism" as a litmus test and an argument for unilateralism, bootstraps expectations, and cuts to safety-net programs. Switch from FOX to Huffington Post, and you will see progressives rewarding exceptionalism, in the form of brilliant model programs from the Harlem Children's Zone to Green for All, as an argument for social innovation and enabling environment based-solutions. Combined, we are reinforcing a frame that only exceptional leadership, exceptional circumstances, and go-it-alone bravado can create improved lives and communities. And while exceptional talent, ideas, and leadership are all critical, we have allowed ourselves as a society to accept sub-standard education, health access, food security, and economic opportunity for the many as the norm, with exceptions of high quality services, outcome measures, and quality of life for the exceptional few or for those served by exceptional organizations.

Have we moved the baseline too low? In our celebration and appropriate reward of the exceptional, have we accepted an unjust and intolerable norm? In our idealism of the exceptional, are we further letting go of and

As featured in:

Stanford **SOCIAL**
INNOVATION REVIEW



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giving up on the scale and sustainability of social contract-based expectations? I see two key challenges that emerge from unbridled exceptionalism; these challenges call for the need to leverage the exceptional with increased advocacy for equity, scale, and sustainability.

The acceptability of individual benefit choices

We all constantly balance the choices we make as individuals between our benefits factors (what's in it for me?) and our values factors (what aligns with my beliefs?). Just look at any recent successful school or library bond measure, and you will see the careful listing of specific new branches, sports fields, etc., to show voters what they get very locally compared to the overall seismic upgrades, replacements of boilers, and improvements in neighborhoods that have the greatest need but may not have the voting impact. This is human nature, and every social marketer recognizes it.

That said, as we have shifted the baseline expectations of what is publicly provided to what exceptional programs can deliver, the acceptability of individual benefit drivers in choice-making gains currency. If you want your child to have PE or music or a library at school, in many districts you need to have an exceptional parent-led school foundation and an exceptional principal who can massage full time equivalency teaching positions. The same is true for many programs, including library reading, parks and recreation youth services, workplace wellness, early literacy, farm-to-school, green jobs training, parenting support, and others that meet basic community needs. Just last Sunday, the *New York Times* reported on the increased trend of public charter schools in suburban districts and the tension between increased choice and the reduction of resources in schools that have

enviable achievement results.² The article illuminates one of many arenas where the balance between individual and public benefit are playing out.

The tyranny of innovation vs. delivery and sustainability in funding

So much of our social-sector funding streams are focused on the development of new programs, new models, and innovative approaches. This investment is critical to solve vexing social problems and to address new and changing challenges. However, the increased focus and acceptance of exceptionalism further accentuates funding in this area while masking the need to fund and sustain core delivery and expansion of programs that work.

The private-sector economic model moves from venture funders investing in the exceptional to capital markets and consumer spending funding widespread distribution. In this era of public sector cuts and diminished expectations for public investment, we often do not have the funding mechanism to bridge from innovator to scale delivery in the social sector. This results in many NGOs with strong programs constantly scrambling to create new pilot programs or to re-package existing programs to meet the social market's demand for exceptionalism. As grantmakers, donors, and public-sector funders, we need to fund exceptional ideas and leaders, and we must fund normative delivery, stability, and expansion of programs and services that work.

So what can we do about this?

My argument is not to dumb things down, or to take credit and reward away from exceptional social innovators. I believe we have a responsibility to advocate for a both/and

understanding that is rapidly getting lost. We need to shift the narrative to include the link between exceptional solutions and the systems change and scale needed to deliver a just baseline. We need to advocate for the value of shared benefit and public responsibility to invest in quality services and equitable access to opportunity. We need to join with other funders and social entrepreneurs to encourage funding models that value and invest in scale and sustainability. Ultimately, we need to leverage exceptional ideas, leaders, and programs, and refuse to accept quality, access, and impact as exceptions.

Links:

¹ Exceptionalism:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_exceptionalism

² Results:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/education/17charters.html?pagewanted=1&r=1>



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