Reflections from **ACSEP Philanthropic Speaker Series and NUS Greater Good Series – Strategic Philanthropy.** An exclusive dinner event, organised by Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy (ACSEP) and NUS Development Office. 14th August 2012

The evening began with an hour of mingling and warm conversations. Smiles were not found wanting in this gathering of philanthropists, corporate giants, and academics. It was a time where ideas and updates were traded and shared amongst like-minded decision-makers who were present with a common purpose of learning from four figures – experts from diverse fields representing a wealth of knowledge and achievements, who were present with the purpose of sharing experiences and promoting peer-learning within the community. Having been given a mandate by ACSEP to write my thoughts on the panel event, I admit: I was slightly nervous while sitting there armed only with pen and paper. Me? What did I know about philanthropy or philanthropists? Yes, rich people (or as I learnt, “high net worth individuals”) or organizations gave money for good causes, and occasionally had a
building or bench named after them. But what of strategic philanthropy? A logical dissection of the phrase’s semantics indicates purposeful giving, but now, is that not an act of common sense? One ought not to give at random. But there had to be more to it. Dinner ended rapidly, and soon, the audience had its riveting gaze pinned on the four individuals taking their seats on stage: Paul Brest (President) of Hewlett Foundation, Richard Eu (Group CEO) of Eu Yan Sang, Anant Nadkarni (Vice President of Group Corporate Sustainability) of Tata Council for Community Initiative, and Agung Waluyo (Director) of Universitas Ciputra Entrepreneurship Centre.

Here are some of my top takeaways.

1) **A bout of ineffectiveness plagues the philanthropic space.** Paul Brest estimates that “of every US$1 given philanthropically, only a few pennies are deployed effectively to solve problems with clear goals and strategy”. Strategic philanthropy therefore (to me anyway), seems to be the fine tuning of an instrument committed to delivering social good. However, this concept is still novel – albeit one that many claim to embrace and more still, to practice. Hence it would have been foolish to proceed with a discussion revolving around this strategy without defining its boundaries from the beginning. This, dear friends, is also where my ignorant mind was enlightened. Paul Brest laid the foundation by stating its tenets as being one involving: A) the laying of clear goals, B) planning a strategy (activity) – e.g. grant making, and C) progress monitoring (getting feedback!). While it may sound as though it bears too similar a resemblance to the conventional concept of “philanthropy” to warrant sitting in a separate category, the emphasis here rests on the third point of evaluation; one must be outcome-oriented in one’s approach to giving. Many philanthropists, foundations, or corporations tend to be cause-oriented – motivated for example, by educationalist aspirations – and give where the need is. However once the gift has exchanged hands, the investor parts with his control over the implementation or correction of the solution to the social problem – at least, the investee has no obligation to heed any advice from the former. This was the panel’s experience and observation. Moreover though some have the practice of evaluating outcomes, not many have the habit of or ability to act on the results. The call to reform is simple: ignore the evidence no more! Revision is integral to the process of strategic philanthropy – one must ensure that there is **concrete** impact in the cause one contributes towards through an active, hands-on partnership with the investee. Hence, the present aforementioned fact of ineffective philanthropy is not an indictment so damning as to warrant snuffing out the philanthropic tendencies (big or small) of any corporation or individual (i.e. don’t stop giving!), for there are alternatives that provide us with solutions through which this situation can be changed.

2) Anant Nadkarni from Tata took Paul Brest’s third tenet of strategic philanthropy a step further and stressed the need to **assess impact in partnership with the target community**. To the extent a 6 day-old in the industry has any standing to bestow praise upon an experienced-other’s philanthropic approach, I say it makes sense! I believe that if we have indeed learnt from the mistake of eurocentrism, we would not be so presumptuous as to assume that we as philanthropists can effect literal change that we deem necessary, on a community we have little or no natural affiliation with. As Nadkarni stressed, it is essential that strategic philanthropists avoid a “giver-centric” assessment, but instead (and importantly so) lend ear to consider the “beneficiaries’ voice” (as Michael E. Porter terms it), for “sustainable value...
can only be co-created”. An analogy that came to my mind was how it would be counter-productive to build a toilet in a place where the only fertilizer the ground receives comes from human excrement.

3) **Give within your means.** This advice went out to potential grant-makers with substantial capital, but I imagine it can also be applied to smaller, individual donors. Giving often requires manpower dedicated to providing intelligence on who to give to and how to give, and without such a team it is difficult to ascertain how to give effectively. But without this, Paul Brest suggests that there is virtue in being a follower. Interesting proposal, but apparently one few accept. When he said “follower”, he was referring to identifying a foundation or body that embodies values similar to one’s own and either contributing directly to that foundation, or emulating the philanthropic work being done.

4) **Donor education is instrumental to the furthering of strategic philanthropy.** From what I gathered that night from conversing with others in the industry, the world is not in want of individuals and corporations willing to give to the community or a cause. However many do not have the experience in giving at such a level and many others are unaware of the more sophisticated strategies of philanthropy. Hence panel discussions such as this are excellent platforms that facilitate peer-learning, which will aid the growing of the philanthropic space to its fullest potential. The night concluded with a panelist’s sporting admission: “I think I have learnt more than I thought I could contribute”. Hopefully the lessons learnt by all that night will birth tangible returns for our society, through increasingly effective philanthropic activity, and that we as individuals and corporations, will aspire towards participating in that change.

*Ms Jessica Fong, Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship & Philanthropy (ACSEP) Research Assistant, joined ACSEP 6 days prior to the Strategic Philanthropy event – 14th August 2012: sharing her thoughts from the event, as a new face and (hopefully!) mind to the sector. The event featured a panel comprising of Prof Paul Brest (President, Hewlett Foundation), Mr Richard Eu (Group CEO, Eu Yan Sang International, Ltd, Singapore), Mr Anant Nadkarni (Vice President, Group Corporate Sustainability, Tata Council for Community Initiatives, India), Dr Agung Waluyo (Director, Universitas Ciputra Entrepreneurship Centre, Ciputra Group, Indonesia).*