

Three Ways Social Entrepreneurs Can Succeed with Startup Accelerators

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Research identifies three keys to accelerator success: applying at the right time, navigating selection biases, and securing funding after graduation.

In his 2015 EIX article, “[Should I Participate in a Business Accelerator?](https://eiexchange.com/content/should-i-participate-in-a-business-accelerator)” (https://eiexchange.com/content/should-i-participate-in-a-business-accelerator) ,” Jon Eckhardt provides an overview of startup accelerators: their origins, how they operate, and the key questions entrepreneurs should consider before applying. Although the article offers valuable guidance, it focuses mainly on traditional accelerators that help entrepreneurs in technology-driven industries grow their businesses and maximize financial returns. Social entrepreneurs, who aim to create meaningful social and/or environmental impact while also achieving financial sustainability, have different challenges and goals.

This article complements Eckhardt’s work by offering research-based insights that explain how social entrepreneurs can determine whether they are well-positioned to benefit from an accelerator program, and which factors decisionmakers use to evaluate applicants before and after the acceleration process.

Our Research

We have researched “social impact accelerators” (SIAs), or that subset of accelerators specifically designed to support startups founded for the express purpose of addressing real-world social and/or environmental challenges through a financially

sustainable business model. We studied four distinct academic articles analyzing data from the Global Accelerator Learning Initiative (GALI), a collaborative data collection effort by the Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs and Emory University designed to promote research that can help explain accelerator-related outcomes (Kher et al., 2023, Kher et al. 2026; Newbert et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2020).

Beginning in 2013, and yearly through the end of 2020, GALI surveyed 23,364 entrepreneurs that applied to a global network of 408 SIAs. GALI looked at the entrepreneurs when they applied and then re-surveyed them one year later, regardless of whether or not they were accepted into an SIA. In total, 9,567 startups completed both surveys, and we examined various subsamples. We found strong evidence that two factors shaped the outcomes associated with applying to and completing an SIA program: not only the venture’s quality and stage of development, but also the SIA’s own biases in evaluating the venture and entrepreneur. These results suggest that social entrepreneurs considering accelerating their ventures would be wise to adopt a strategic approach by understanding and anticipating the realities of the pre-SIA selection and post-SIA funding decision processes.

These insights based on our research can help social entrepreneurs decide whether and when to apply to an SIA, how to maximize their chances of acceptance, and how to best convert the SIA experience into follow-on funding. This can help founders approach SIAs and investors more deliberately and increase their chances of getting meaningful value from them.

1. Think about whether you’re ready



Getting into an SIA can help your startup, but only if you are ready to take advantage of the opportunity. Our research found that very early-stage startups often see little to no improvement in external funding, revenue generation, or hiring after acceleration because they lack the structure needed to absorb and apply the resources SIAs provide. In contrast, startups with some existing traction -- such as prior investment, existing revenue streams, and/or a burgeoning employee base -- are much more likely to experience meaningful growth after the SIA. In other words, timing is paramount when considering whether to apply to an SIA: You may only get one shot, so don't waste it by applying too early, when you lack the resources to get the most value from it.

What to do

Before applying to an SIA, carefully assess your startup's stage of development. Consider delaying the decision if you haven't yet built something substantial, such as a working product, initial users, or early revenue. After all, you need something to accelerate. At this early stage other options might be a better fit, such as the NSF I-Corps program, which provides funding to help university-based, technology-focused ventures with the customer development process. By applying to an SIA at the right time, you position your startup to extract significantly more value from the accelerator experience and maximize your chances of scaling your venture.

2. Be strategic about how you present your startup

How you communicate your startup's strengths to an SIA plays a critical role in how it is evaluated. What you believe to be obvious signs of success -- prior investment, social impact, etc. -- are unlikely to be interpreted in a neutral way. Instead, these "signals" will invariably be filtered (consciously or unconsciously) through decisionmakers' biased beliefs about what successful social entrepreneurs and their ventures "should" look like.

Decades of research on bias suggests that characteristics such as race, ethnicity, country of origin, immigration status, and gender play a role in how people perceive the abilities, intelligence, behaviors, intentions, etc. of others. This means that when your messaging aligns with those perceptions, it is more likely to be rewarded, whereas misalignment can lead decisionmakers to discount or even penalize you and

your startup. Indeed, our research on gender bias, one of the world's most prevalent and universal biases, shows that emphasizing strong financial performance is likely to increase the odds of gaining acceptance into an SIA for male founders, while emphasizing a proven commitment to social and/or environmental impact may improve this outcome for female founders. This is not because of merit, but because of the systemic gender biases that affect how these types of stereotypically "masculine" and "feminine" signals are most often interpreted.

What to do

Be intentional about your narrative by clearly highlighting your startup's strengths, but think carefully about how your audience may perceive your message. Rather than assuming your startup's results will speak for themselves and that a one-size-fits-all story will land the same way everywhere, actively shape how those results might be perceived by tailoring your pitch with your audience in mind. You might start by considering what the SIA says about the types of startups and founders it supports, and whether those claims align with its track record of acceptances. For example, *Communitas America*, an SIA located in Harlem, was created in 2018 to support female and BIPOC social entrepreneurs, and it has delivered on this promise, with these groups comprising the overwhelming majority of its founder cohorts since then. Once you have identified a target set of SIAs, your pitch should highlight the characteristics about you and your venture that best align with their values and goals.

3. Getting into an SIA is only half the battle

Although participating in an SIA program can provide your startup with much needed credibility and access to resources, you'll still need additional funding after the program to achieve scale and fully realize the SIA's benefits. Unfortunately, completing an SIA program may not uniformly benefit all founders. For example, our research shows that while completing an SIA program helped all social entrepreneurs experience, on average, greater access to multiple forms of funding (equity, debt, philanthropy), men enjoyed a far bigger increase than women. More specifically, we saw that before participating in an SIA, startups led by women raised less equity and debt financing than men, but more philanthropic financing. Women did raise their equity and debt financing after going through an SIA program,

but lost ground in the philanthropic funding. The net is that the gap between men and women founders was even greater than before. In other words, investors of all types seem to be more willing to fund startups that have gone through an SIA program, but at the same time, they also seem to favor those founded by men.

What to do

As advised when applying to an SIA, do your homework by researching the types of startups and founders each investor has funded previously. Then, look for alignment between their track record and your situation and tailor your message to each investor individually. A quick Internet search will reveal countless funding opportunities (e.g., loan programs, grants, competitions, etc.) for specific types of founders and ventures. For example, the U.S. Small Business Administration's Women's Business Center or the U.S. Department of Commerce's Minority Business Development Agency were specifically created to help founders from underrepresented groups access the resources they need, including financial capital, to scale their businesses. Of course, external funding is just one component of a broader strategy toward financing your startup. Continue to build the strong fundamentals needed to generate funds organically, which will both reduce your dependence on external funding sources and maximize your options when you do need it.

Summary

Navigating the SIA landscape can be difficult for social entrepreneurs. And, although SIAs can play a meaningful role in improving startup outcomes, their value depends on the entrepreneurs' own readiness and the biases of those evaluating them. If you are deliberate about when you apply and how you position your venture in light of those biases, you will be far more likely to see meaningful returns, both during and after the acceleration process. Recognizing that outcomes are not entirely within your control allows you to navigate them more strategically, rather than being caught off guard. Ultimately, the goal is not just to gain entry into an SIA, but also to get the most from the experience so that you can generate meaningful social, environmental, and economic impact. By understanding each SIA's decision process and aligning your startup's needs, strengths, and trajectory accordingly, you can best position your startup for success.

EXPLORE THE RESEARCH

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