

Williams College

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Project Title: “The Aksum Project – Deploying Low-Cost Design-thinking Incubators to Facilitate Homegrown Solutions to Community Challenges”

Country: United States/Mexico (June-August 2020)

Objective

Develop and deploy low-cost design-thinking incubators at schools/colleges in developing/afflicted regions to provide local students with skill-training and resources to solve problems and execute solutions in their home communities.

Background of Problem

I define a “foreign intervention” as the unprompted involvement of non-residents of a community in solving that community’s issues. Under this definition, foreign interventions may not necessarily come from overseas or a faraway country; they could come from within the same city as the afflicted community.

Over the past decade, foreign intervention, and outside aid in general, have been the subject of tremendous controversy in the field of development economics. Despite NGO’s, non-profits, and charitable individuals having the best intentions, these interventions, irrespective of the underlying issue (disease, social injustice, homelessness, etc.), can cause more harm than good to the communities afflicted by the issue at hand.¹ A primary reason for this collateral issue is that, despite the resources at the disposal of NGO’s, non-profits, and charities, these organizations do not have the same insights into the community’s issues as those who live or have lived in the community of interest. With this observation in mind, building a sustainable way to empower residents in a developing or struggling community to solve their locale’s problems is an exigent structural problem with philanthropy, and one that this Davis Project for Peace aims to solve.

Solution Overview

Through this Davis Project for Peace grant, I aim to implement a project I have been working on over the six months—“The Aksum Project.” As a macro-objective, this project aims to develop and deploy low-cost design-thinking incubators at schools/colleges in poor communities across the world, and to eventually form a network of such incubators to allow for cross-pollination of ideas, collaboration, and project execution. However, for this project, I aim to use this grant to deploy two low-cost incubators: one at The Monarch School in San Diego, CA (a school for homeless children in downtown San Diego) and one at Instituto México de Baja California in Tijuana, Mexico.

Over my time at Williams, I have been involved with founding and developing the College’s design-thinking program led by Design-thinker-in-Residence Ric Grefé. Developed over the past two decades, design-thinking is a powerful, cost-effective, and scalable skillset that aims to develop human-centered solutions to problems across fields, from academia and non-profits to management and engineering. Originating at design firms such as R/GA and IDEO, the framework has been adopted by large corporations such as IBM, McKinsey, and Accenture as a toolkit for finding and developing the “right” solutions for the target community. As will be expounded in the subsequent section, design-thinking requires very little physical resources, and when effectively taught to a community, is capable of reproducibly generating solutions to the local community’s issues. My solution combines setting up physical incubator spaces at the two aforementioned schools with a structured design-thinking curriculum, a network of other incubators, and a way for charitable individuals and non-profits to support community-grown projects originating from the incubators.

¹ There are numerous cases of this, but for the sake of the two-page limit of this document, I omit going into detail. However, if further examples are required, I am happy to provide additional data.

Project Specifics

In setting up these two design-thinking incubators, there are four key objectives that this Davis Project for Peace grant will support:

- **Initiate.** Set-up two design-thinking incubators: one at The Monarch School and one at Instituto México de Baja California. These incubators are classrooms that are either designated as or converted to (depending on space constraints) design labs, and provide the physical resources necessary to facilitate design-thinking. Resources necessary to facilitate design-thinking include: sticky notes, sharpies, construction materials, white/chalkboards, and a computer with internet access.
- **Instruct.** Pilot after or in-school design-thinking workshops, modeled off of the Design-thinking at Williams program, with teams of students and teachers from both schools. I will be the primary instructor managing and facilitating these workshops, and I will be adapting the curriculum that I developed while working under Ric Grefé to teach design-thinking at Williams for the high school.
- **Network.** Build cross-collaboration between incubators; modeled off of the Design for America network of design studios across college campuses, I aim to set-up a the foundations of an incubator network, starting with these two incubators. The network of “Aksum Project” incubators aims to provide a structured channel for students in different incubators to connect with one another, share ideas, and collaborate on projects for their respective communities.
- **Sustain.** Given that these incubators are deliberately deployed in poor and developing communities, outside financial resources are necessary to ensure the success of incubated design-thinking solutions. In order to support execution for these projects, I plan to create a network and pathway for non-profits and charitable individuals to personally sponsor the execution of these projects. While the solutions of projects will come from the students working in the incubators themselves, non-profits and charitable individuals looking to support these homegrown solutions will have a way to securely contribute to verified projects.

My Experience

Over the past four years, I've worked in diverse jobs across the world, and these experiences have helped me develop the skills required to execute this project. Notable experiences of mine include:

- I took a gap year before enrolling at Williams to volunteer and teach entrepreneurship, introductory finance, and introductory computer science classes at **The Monarch School**, a school for homeless children in downtown San Diego. Many of the students at The Monarch School are from the border region, and thus share a cultural overlap with the students from Instituto México de Baja California. Additionally, I am fluent in Spanish (having grown-up in San Diego and taught at The Monarch School).
- At Williams, I founded the [Alhambra Consulting Group](#) in 2017, a full-fledged undergraduate consulting group that provides pro-bono data analytics and research for Berkshire County institutions. Over the past three years, I've managed over forty people to execute projects for over a dozen Berkshire groups and businesses.
- I've worked as a teaching assistant for the **Design-thinking at Williams** program for the past three years, and I am an experienced design-thinking instructor; through this program, I helped found a Design for America chapter at Williams, taught design-thinking workshops to Williams College faculty, staff, and students, and used design-thinking to execute socially-minded projects for both Alhambra and my personal initiatives.