Section I: Narrative

The Golden Heights Project: Youth Civic Engagement Program

Country of Project: United States of America
Sponsoring College: Yale University
Project Leader: Abnner Olivares (USA; Yale University)

Developed to equip East Los Angeles students with the mentorship and the guidance to respond to the communal issues they know best, the Golden Heights Project (GHP) set out to inspire young people from this community to give back and become involved in local public service. Specifically, a year-long program structure was designed to promote the inclusion of these students in local public service efforts through two unique opportunities: our Public Service Leadership Conference (PSLC) in the Spring of 2021 and our Summer Academy for which we applied for funding.

Additional Fundraising Efforts
No additional fundraising efforts were made.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?
I was inspired to found the Golden Heights Project following my encounter with fellow East LA natives on the East Coast. We bonded over our common desire to uplift the disadvantaged back home with the resources we’ve been privileged to receive and became determined to give back the way we knew best.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?
As first-generation Americans who are often the first in their families to pursue their dreams in higher education and beyond, members of our community have been instilled with the perception that we must “get out of the hood” and build our lives elsewhere. The encouragement and practice of this mentality proved to me that there existed no sound structures supporting underrepresented students in Los Angeles to pursue their professional goals and aspirations in the neighborhoods they come from. Our program chose to focus our efforts on Public Service and bridge the gap between students and local opportunities.

Why did you choose your host site to work in? What was it like to work on your host site?
I chose East Los Angeles because it’s the neighborhood my team and I grew up in and know best. We call this place home and it was important for us to practice what we preached. It was an honor to work with local students who entrusted us with their summer and watch them rediscover their city through GHP.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? + Communication Challenges
Because our project was proposing an in-person component amidst the uncertainty around the vaccination eligibility of our target demographic (middle/high school students), there was obvious concern among families regarding the participation of their kids in our program. While we had taken every imaginable precaution, when the time came to apply to our program, we weren’t getting as many applications as we had virtually. It wasn’t until I changed our group’s approach for outreach that we began to get the first of our cohort. Setting up individual calls and meetings with concerned parents and students to address the measures we were taking and to assure them of our commitment to the safety of their kids was important in receiving applications and making sure we had the chance to offer students a summer experience.
Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
I was well aware that when I applied for the support of the Davis Foundation there was a real possibility my team and I would not be able to hold the in-person programming we had prepared. Ultimately, I made the executive decision that it was best to run our program in a hybrid model and to incorporate as much virtual programming as possible to keep students safe.

Our cohort met three times a week, outside a public library. Our goal was to have students bond before heading virtual in weeks 4, 5, and 6. Doing so allowed for our virtual work to be productive as the trust had been built amongst our group previously. Nevertheless, engaging younger students virtually was a lot tougher than we had anticipated. In our final week as a group, we met in person once again to culminate the program and have students present the final projects they had been working independently on.

Our earlier preparation, a separate virtual budget was immensely helpful in the transition our group made and was helpful for me in terms of figuring out where we could support students more effectively given the shifting of funds. The most significant and important change that was made was surrounding our food budget and the funding of projects. Because we opted to give students grocery stipends for food instead of pre-ordering large lunches, we were able to double the funding for supporting students’ policy-related projects from $100 to up to $200 per project. This was by far the most exciting part of the virtual model for me because it ultimately better reflected GHP’s mission in placing more resources and trust into the hands of the very students we have encouraged to better participate in our neighborhood. Additionally, continuing on my commitment to the program’s sustainability, the additional funding allowed me to hire two interns from our PPLC Spring experience and offer them unique summer experiences as well.

Ultimately, I would encourage future PfP grantees to find ways as I did to capitalize on the opportunities a hybrid work setting provides and to further lean into the areas under your control and influence.

How do you define peace? How does or will your project contribute to peace?
Peace, as I witnessed it this past summer, is the security of knowing you are supported in the place you call home. GHP set out to contribute to East LA the peace defined above. Recognizing that there existed no sound structures supporting underrepresented students to reinvest their skills here at home, we set out to be the structure necessary to foster these goals and encourage students to give back. We achieved our short-term goal of reaching 20+ students this first year and my hope is to only grow from there.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?
I am more confident than ever that it will be projects like the ones PfP funds that will have the greatest impact on inspiring students to make their worlds a better place. This experience has offered me a lens into the dedication it takes to manage grassroots efforts like GHP and has given me the opportunity to work directly with the people for whom I am an adamant advocate.

Personal Statement
“The summer our cohort entrusted with GHP amidst a pandemic is a testament to the strength, commitment, and grit East LA students carry in their hearts. It also demonstrates the importance and necessity of the program our team put together. Ultimately, it was an honor to watch our students grow and I will continue to improve this experience for the benefit of my community.”
Section II: Photographs