

Impact Squared [i<sup>2</sup>]  
United States of America  
Occidental College  
Tzu Kit Chan (Malaysia, Occidental College)

### Summary

Impact Squared [i<sup>2</sup>] was a 3-day incubation program for student entrepreneurs to found high impact, effective for profit and nonprofit organizations. Participants were equipped with the tools, resources, and connections they needed to increase the odds of successfully founding their project ideas.

### Project description

Myth 1: Charities are a dime a dozen. There's not much room for innovation or growth in impact and efficiency.

Myth 2: Students are better off pursuing internships to build their career trajectory than founding a nonprofit.

Truth: Studies show that effective, high-impact nonprofits are rare, and the best organizations are often 100x to 1000x more impactful than the least impactful organization working in the same space — we're talking 2 to 3 orders of magnitude!

As for the latter, "nonprofit entrepreneurship is a highly neglected career opportunity that, fueled by a more analytical, effective-altruist mindset, can lead to cost-effective, evidence-based outcomes that are approximately equivalent to donating ~\$200,000 to effective charities per year. It provides a chance to build a portfolio of useful skills and great career capital, and to have high job satisfaction while retaining substantial individual impact."<sup>1</sup>

I'd like to largely credit this project proposal to the ideas I was exposed to within the Effective Altruism (EA) community — a growing philosophical movement and research field using high-quality evidence and careful reasoning to figure out how we can do the most good and take action on that basis. I've been a part of the growing community for two years now, surrounded by people who take the questions and ideas seriously. For example, one set of EA ideas (out of many, many great ideas) is to use the "neglectedness, tractability, scalability"<sup>2</sup> framework, a simple mental litmus test that can help us intuitively evaluate if a cause area idea has good grounds for being cost-effective, and therefore worth our time and money allocated into it: neglected (not getting the attention or funding it needs), tractable (solvable and we have good solutions), and scalable (this problem affects a great number of lives).

With EA in mind, Impact Squared [i<sup>2</sup>] sought to identify world-class college students to found effective high-impact projects that meet the funding bar of top evaluators like GiveWell or OpenPhil. Why college students? We think young adults in college are generally optimized for learning, generally more open-minded to new ideas, and have higher career malleability, as this demographic is figuring out what they want to do in the future and testing their career fit with exposures like internships or extracurricular opportunities. By focusing their efforts on the most promising solutions to our most pressing problems, we can potentially bring about tremendous amounts of good.

Putting it all together, Impact Squared [i<sup>2</sup>] existed to enable more effective, high-impact projects that could positively shape the world. We welcomed project proposals that werenonprofit or for-profit by nature, as long as their idea had a strong alignment with EA principles. Our 3-day incubation program equipped selected student founders to start EA-aligned initiatives with the potential of getting funding from the goldstandard organizations in the charity evaluation space like GiveWell or OpenPhil, who set the bar for effective high-impact projects around the world. We wanted to take the fear out of entrepreneurship, build excitement for doing lots of good, and to recognize talent and invest in this talent before they even believed in themselves. The holistic selection process factored in the strength of each student founder

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<sup>1</sup> Twitter. Accessed on September 19th.

[https://mobile.twitter.com/Charity\\_Ep/status/1476177443773943808](https://mobile.twitter.com/Charity_Ep/status/1476177443773943808)

<sup>2</sup> Non Trivial, "Make a non-trivial difference." Accessed on September 19th.

[.https://non-trivial.org/?utm\\_source=Google+Ads&utm\\_medium=cpc&utm\\_campaign=2022-07-25%3A+Searched+EA+impression&utm\\_id=Search&gclid=Cj0KCQjw7KqZBhCBARIsAI-fTKK-YZH0wbK5Q6cCEjdNULSihE05JfaFND0E8k\\_DFDHKxuyCRQrpoylaAh8tEALw\\_wcB](https://non-trivial.org/?utm_source=Google+Ads&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=2022-07-25%3A+Searched+EA+impression&utm_id=Search&gclid=Cj0KCQjw7KqZBhCBARIsAI-fTKK-YZH0wbK5Q6cCEjdNULSihE05JfaFND0E8k_DFDHKxuyCRQrpoylaAh8tEALw_wcB)

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relative to the strength of their EA-aligned project proposals, with more weightage given to the former. We considered their epistemics (how they think / what they think about), their track record in leadership and project-building, and their potential to successfully execute on their great idea. That was the theory behind the vision. Translating all that into action turned out to be really hard and as expected with any project, we faced some hurdles that we had to struggle through.

We chose the host site called “Atlantis” which is the site of a fellowship program for high school students in Berkeley; it was truly perfect because it was at the epicenter of the main UC Berkeley campus. Aside from being surrounded by sororities and fraternities, Downtown Berkeley is only a 20minute walk away, the main train station BART is only a 25minutes walk, and the location has generally high student populations. In hindsight the location really saved money and it was easy to coordinate rides, as public transport was accessible.

The main changes we made to my original plan were: the duration of the program, accessing the funds, and scale of the project. Instead of a week, we compressed the content into three days to accommodate people’s schedules. Tapping into some of our partners from the EA community, we managed to garner free labor in the form of talent support, connections, and free work hours which reduced operational costs more than we anticipated. We had to narrow down from our initial plan to accept 50 people to just 30 people in the effort to fit our budget of \$10,000. We received a total of 98 applications (YES almost hitting a 100), and narrowed down to 30 - 35 promising applicants, with a ~selection rate of 35%. I did some calibration exercises with my team to determine who was a great fit, and who seemed like a decent “maybe” candidate. This was pretty eyeopening since I’ve never been in an “admissions” perspective before; I grew to appreciate how challenging that role is if the terminal goal is to weave a sense of community.

There were no further fundraising efforts for the project and we largely depended on student volunteers effort who believed in the mission of Impact Squared, and speakers who were willing to travel to speak to our participants. It took quite a creative effort to save money here and there. For example, we leveraged the local connections we had via our student volunteer team when sourcing for vegan catering restaurant. Our consistent messaging to our participants to use public transport also paid dividends, as there were only a few outliers who needed big sums of transport reimbursement. We also feel particularly grateful that some participants saw how useful the retreat could be for their ideas that they decided to pay for their own flight tickets! On the admissions end, we really tried to select more people from the Bay Area so that the transportation cost wouldn’t be an issue, and coincidentally, we received the most applications from San Francisco and Berkeley region (where we did most of our community word-of-mouth advertising at anyways). Since we’re required to spend all the funds, I don’t think it’s foreseeable that I will continue building upon the work that we’ve already done. I do think it has been valuable for me to have implemented this project and to actually see that people found it to be useful (which based on our retreat survey, turned out to be highly rated!).

### Reflection

I define peace as the doing the most good we possibly can, for as long as we can. I think my project contributes to that definition of peace by igniting the passion and fire each student founder needed to boldly pursue their social-impact oriented entrepreneurial endeavors in the mid to long term. Even if some founders decide not to pursue their projects, I’m willing to bet that they are only switching gears to trying new project ideas or to generate fresher solutions to common societal problems. I learned that tangibly impacting this world demands a lot of *thoughtfulness* and *agency*: thoughtfulness to critically and rationally engage with what the world needs, and agency which is building up the competency and sense of initiative to bring projects to life. As I was reflecting on the many brilliant proposals and individuals we received, the project has changed the way I think about this world by increasing my appreciation for just how complex some issues are, but at the same time, how many deeply-thoughtful and competent people there are out there in this world who can, and *chose* to make a difference; I feel like this is the biggest thing I’ve taken away from building Impact Squared.

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Personal statement (for quotation)

“There are many ambitious opportunities to do good that have not been thoroughly explored. Impact Squared sought to equip our participants with the mental models, tools, and connections they need to succeed in founding their high-impact, effective charities or organizations.”

Chan Tzu Kit