

“Project Sapana (Dream)”
Digital education and socioeconomic mobility in rural Nepal: Educational bootcamp for underrepresented school students with apprenticeship-based job market exposure

Project Location: Nepal

Project Lead: Himal Raj Pandey (Nepal) | Williams College '25

Nominating college: Williams College

Project Description

Project Sapana equipped students from under resourced backgrounds with digital literacy skills (both soft skills and technical skills) that would help them excel when the opportunity arises. To create such opportunities, we connected them with executives and senior management at three leading tech companies in the capital city for a hands-on job exposure over multiple weeks at multiple companies.

With a passion for making systemic level changes in Education, my background motivated me to pursue the issue of reducing educational inequity. I had seen the variability in learning resources in my own experiences of schooling, where even the brightest of students at times would be disadvantaged due to the lack of resources available. Having been through such stark differences, I was motivated to pursue this project to try combat the systemic injustice that lies in our society, where a student's background affects their long-term growth. I chose a more grassroots approach initially, as it would be difficult to convince the policy makers that the method would be a good way to go forward without any data.

While the initial school was in Marpak Village, the new school was in Kankali, Kathmandu. Although the location and the slight target social demographics of the project changed, the overall mission and target was preserved. Kankali Secondary School is a under resourced government school where most of the students are on a scholarship and take 30-60 minutes to get to school and back on average. The school is also located outside of the main Kathmandu Valley in the hills of Naikap.

The major adjustment I had to make to the project was the change of locations from Marpak to Kankali. While I had personal ties to Marpak Village, as I had lived there previously and talked to the villagers about the problems they were facing, I was not able to conduct the project there due to the Monsoon Landslides blocking the roads and my recent ACL injury making it difficult to climb steep hills. However, the problem the school in Marpak was facing was very similar to the one in Kankali, where students from under resourced backgrounds did not have the means and information to see the long-term benefits of education. This made the change in schools much smoother, and I was able to keep everything else intact. The industry partners were also different from the ones we mentioned, as we were able to connect to companies with better fit to the project once I was in Nepal. We connected with Bhoos (a social game development company), GrowByData (a multinational data analytics company with clients in the US) and F1Soft Group (the leading fintech company in Nepal with reach all over the country).

The project also went for a longer period than intended, due to the timeline of the company partners. All the students were engaged during this time and were able to learn further both from the mentors and the company executives. The longer exposure also gave the students a better idea of the industries and motivated most of them to pursue their dreams going forward. The changes also reflect how things look different when on-site versus thinking about it from behind the computer. However, all the changes that took place made the project even more successful, and we were able to create a bigger impact.

I have established a team to take this project further, and we're in the process of talking with the ministry of education and other policy makers to implement this model into their plans. The plans forward would include using the data from this pilot project to take a more top-down approach and have student ambassadors to run the program at the grassroots level.

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Reflection

We define peace as anything that aims to reduce the fundamental reasons for the start of conflict; in this project, we tackled the “socio-economic” reason and tried reducing hardships arising from that, and the difficult choices people must make to keep that peace. By exposing students to both the skills required to succeed, and the work experience needed to connect those skills with their dreams, their parents the secondhand knowledge of what they were being taught, and their future children the access to this information, we were able to impact three different generations who could dream bigger due to this project.

The students were initially unsure what pathways to choose as they went forward and weren't exposed to the career market. They were all nervous the first day, didn't know what kind of resources existed, and were still in the beginning stages of learning about the kind of work they would be able to do if they continued in their current trajectories. Due to this project, we had students who were able to gain a lot of confidence presenting in front of a large audience. They learned how to write reflectively and were able to learn the main ideas regarding coding, design thinking, networking, pitching, and argumentation. In the short term, this project helped the students keep themselves on track with their dreams and was able to expose them to a new set of resources that let them dream bigger. As mentioned by our students, those who were thinking about dropping out after high school are now motivated to continue learning programming after they have seen what opportunities are waiting for them. Some mentioned that they were able to gain the confidence to overcome their stuttering in front of an audience, while others who were extremely introverted are now able to confidently express themselves and present their skillsets to others.

At the end of the project, we also presented to all the educational and policy leaders in the country, including senior guests who have been in respectable positions of educational change and a champion for education equity in their career. The project was also highlighted in the national news and gained widespread publicity due to the success and overwhelmingly positive testimonials from both the students and the industry executives supporting the project.

The project allowed me to learn more about the deeper underlying issues of systemic injustice that exists around us. While I previously thought that there was just a socio-economic cause behind it, through this project, I learned that it didn't work in a silo but was due to a combination of factors such as health, education, and economic inequity. Now, I am starting to think about creating a systematic way of integrating these various factors as I go forward. This way, instead of having other factors hold someone back from economic mobility, we can concurrently solve these problems as they arise to create a better system.

I would like to thank the team at Davis PfP and Williams College for providing me this opportunity to carry out what I've been passionate about since a long time and supporting this project. I have learned a lot about what it means to be a changemaker and a leader as we swim against the flow of systemic injustice taking place around us. I would also like to thank all the friends and the staff for helping us making this project a success. This project would also not have been possible without my family, who have always

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been there to motivate me to become a changemaker, and especially my brother, who worked countless nights to help me figure out the on-site partnership strategies to make the second half of the project work. I would also like to thank the students in the project for diligently following through and showing the motivation that allowed me to teach them what I could to try close the educational gap I have felt throughout the years. I hope to continue this effort by connecting what Project Sapana has done in a policy level to hopefully implement this across this country in the coming years.

“Projects for Peace has taught me valuable skills as a leader and a changemaker and has allowed me to glance into the various ways systemic injustice is taking place in our society. Due to this project, the 17 students we have taught have all expressed that this was a turning point in their lives and has allowed them to overcome the fundamental challenges they were facing to continue with their passion. While the long-term impact of scaling this will still be an ongoing challenge, due to the support from the PfP, we are now able to show that this model works and try impact the lives of under resourced youth in Nepal suffering from the systemic injustice and the informational poverty that holds them back.” - Himal Raj Pandey.