Project Title: It takes a Village: Fostering Youth Educational Development in Little Haiti  
Location: United States; Little Haiti; Miami, Florida  
Nominating College: Williams College  
Project Leader: Shiara Pyrrhus

Project Summary
Education is the great equalizer. When I was a freshman in high school, I was accepted to the Mass. General Hospital Youth Scholars Program, which exposes marginalized students to healthcare careers and higher education. Through the MGH program, I was able to tour colleges all over New England. I learned about the financial aid process, created a college list, and even had a retired English teacher read and edit every single version of my personal statement and supplements. Without my college prep program, reaching a place like Williams would not have been impossible, but it would have been much more difficult. It takes a village to go to college.

Background
It takes a village to go to college. I would like to pay it forward and become a part of that village for high school students in Little Haiti. Florida is home to more Haitian immigrants than any other state (about 280,000, to be precise). Since the 1980s, Haitian immigrants have settled in Greater Miami and succeeded in creating a replica of their native land; a home away from home. In 2016, the City of Miami officially designated the neighborhood wedged between the city’s Design District and the wealthy Upper Eastside as “Little Haiti.” Today, Little Haiti is a cultural hub full of authentic creole restaurants, Caribbean-style marketplaces (like the Iron Market in Port-au-Prince), and vibrant street art.

Unfortunately, Little Haiti has not-so-little problems. Climate gentrification, poverty, crime, and non-communicable diseases (particularly hypertension and cervical cancer) all threaten the community’s ability to sustain peace. Considering the various issues prevalent in Little Haiti, I could have taken this project in many different directions. But the informational interviews and research I conducted all kept bringing me back to one topic: education.

Research indicates that educational attainment is highly correlated with economic status and is the most significant predictor of health status. Exposing Little Haiti’s high school students to the college process and giving them the tools to attain a place like Williams will, in turn, help diminish some of the aforementioned problems facing Little Haiti. Education, specifically higher education in America, is crucial to creating long-term peace.

The economic divide in Miami is stark and is reflected in Little Haiti’s public school system, particularly within its high schools. Little Haiti’s poverty rate of 47 percent is substantially higher than the City of Miami’s (30 percent). Little Haiti’s primary high school, Miami Edison Senior High School, has an average proficiency test score (in mathematics and languages) of 29 percent, which is 47 percent lower than the Florida average. According to a study conducted by The Children’s Trust, many students in Little Haiti believe that their teachers do not care about them or their issues. Schools in Little Haiti, like in all low-income areas, are underfunded, understaffed, and do not have the resources to expose students to different educational and career opportunities.

Thus, with the help of the Family Action Network Movement (FANM), a nonprofit organization that aims to empower low-income families through programs ranging from education and literacy, health promotion, and youth development and leadership, I hope to create a summer college preparation program for Little Haiti’s high school students, particularly, juniors and seniors.

Implementation
Besides programs that expose students to STEM careers, there are no formally organized college prep programs in Little Haiti. With the Davis Project for Peace grant, I aspire to emphasize the various educational and professional opportunities available to high school students. FANM has the infrastructure and is a trusted organization in Little Haiti. With their help and through advertising in Miami Edison Senior High School, I have no doubt that 25 juniors and seniors will want to take part in this college prep program.
The program will run for two hours every weekday for four weeks. In the first half of the first week, I want to get to know the students and their aspirations: Are there students who want to go to a trade school? Nursing school? Are there undocumented students? How are they doing academically? What extracurricular activities are they in? This will allow me to tailor the program to their specific needs. Then, in the second half of the first week, we will learn about the different types of colleges (private, public, community, research, liberal arts, etc.), particularly in their area. This first week, I really want to help them decide what characteristics they want in a college and to begin creating their college list and considering their requirements.

During the second week, I want to focus on drafting or writing personal statements and/or supplements. As a Mellon Mays Research Fellow and an English Honors Candidate, I am deeply passionate about writing and am enthusiastic about giving others the space and freedom to do so. I plan to run this section of this program as a workshop where students get to read each other’s work and provide feedback. The personal statement is one of the most important parts of the college application process, and I am determined to help students develop the skills and confidence to tell their stories.

During the third week of the program, we will discuss financial aid, FAFSA, and scholarships. I plan to zoom in on a Scholarship Administration Coordinator from my previous college prep program to tackle these topics because financial aid is not my expertise, and I do not want to steer the students wrong. We will also discuss the SATs/ACTs and go over some practice problems together. Each student will be given an SAT/ACT prep book so they can practice on their own. I do not plan to spend too much time on standardized tests because many colleges have deemphasized their importance and no longer require them.

The last week of the program will be dedicated to tying up loose ends. We will revisit topics students want to spend more time on and explore aspects of the college process they are interested in learning more about. I also want to organize a Career Day and invite guests with careers students are interested in to come speak.

Throughout the program, I want to organize three college tours, one of which will be at the University of Miami. I believe it is crucial that students get to see for themselves what a college campus is like and to meet with current college students. Furthermore, I will offer two weekend classes in Haitian Creole for parents so they can learn more about the American college process. Oftentimes, immigrant parents want to be involved in their children’s educational journeys but lack the knowledge or resources to do so. These classes will help change that.

**Anticipated Results**

Working with FANM will ensure that aspects of this college prep program endure past the four weeks. The infrastructure and curriculum I build for the program will be shared and can be taught by anyone. I plan to record the sessions, especially the ones having to do with financial aid and writing personal statements. I will share these recordings with the leaders of FANM and the guidance counselors at Miami Edison Senior High School. I will also buy and store extra SAT/ACT prep books at FANM so future students can borrow them. Furthermore, the University of Miami already has connections to Little Haiti for public health purposes. My hope is to contact them about having students in Little Haiti tour the campus annually and find out ways they might be able to make that more financially feasible. Lastly, as a first-generation college student and Haitian immigrant, I am personally invested in these students; I am personally invested in Little Haiti. There is nothing I want to see more than all of these students attending college. I will share my contact information with them and be a resource for however long they allow me to be.