

Project Proposal: Inspiring Academic and Career Success Through Peer-Mentorship: Bridging Butaro's Secondary and Post-Secondary Populations

Country of Project Implementation: Rwanda

Sponsoring College: Dartmouth College

Project Leader: Hugh McKenzie, USA, Dartmouth College

Student Team: Lannan Abbott, USA, Dartmouth College; Eleanor Zwart, USA, Dartmouth College

Website: <https://minuza-butaro.squarespace.com>

This summer, with the support of Davis Projects for Peace, our team developed the Minuza Butaro mentorship program to foster an education-center environment in the impoverished town of Butaro by providing comprehensive academic support through peer-to-peer learning, professional development, and community engagement. By targeting the promotion of English language learning of secondary school students in two under-funded and under-performing schools, we hope to reverse the trend of high dropout rates and encourage students to become leaders in the local and global community.

The idea to dedicate support towards the Butaro community came when Hugh returned to school following a summer living in Rwanda conducting research for the University of Global Health Equity. The university's campus is in Butaro, where the newly built facility stands opposite to one of the poorest communities in the world. Hugh saw this contrast as an opportunity to bridge the two communities. With a lack of understanding of Butaro's most pressing needs, Hugh sought out the help of peers from diverse backgrounds to deliver the most impact, two of whom were students at the University of Global Health Equity. The funds granted by the Davis Projects for Peace gave us the necessary resources to support the program and the students, and no other fundraising efforts were done.

The idea of a mentorship program focused on English language learning was developed in response to the high secondary school dropout rates observed in the community. With insight from Axel, a graduate of the Butaro school system, dropout rates were attributed mainly to a lack of English language skills that prevented students from engaging fully in school, from classroom learning to national examinations. Many students were discouraged from continuing school for this reason, but a lack of motivation was also compounded by the effect of observing older friends and family drop out early. To tackle this multi-generational issue, as a team we devised a peer-to-peer mentorship program to support students in their academic success.

The secondary school dropout rates in Butaro can be traced back to the country's complex language composition. The country's languages consist of a mix of Kinyarwanda, the Rwandan traditional dialect, French, and English. In 2008, the Rwandan government made the decision to switch the education system's language from French to English. This recent change has complicated the country's linguistic landscape, with no dominant language used. As a result, Rwandan students lack the cohesion necessary to excel in school.

The issue of discontinued education, however, is not unique to Butaro and is common across all impoverished countries. Many development economists have studied the decision-making tradeoffs of families in impoverished conditions. Typically subsistence farmers, impoverished families often see education as a cost burden when children can generate extra income for the family by working in the fields. Part of the issue is the lack of short-term needs that prevent families from realizing the longer-term gains that come from education. The mentorship program seeks to highlight the value that education provides.

Education continues to be the greatest enabler for youth success and opportunity. Exclusion from this access creates an atmosphere conducive to the cultivation of violence and human rights abuses. To us, peace is defined as the ability to safely pursue one's interests and goals. By encouraging further

education through higher levels, young people will not only be able to see how they can take ownership of their own journeys forward, but they can also understand the potential in working towards a common goal, thus establishing a sense of community, hope and peace. Schooling and community connections encourage youth to pursue involvement in other empowering hobbies, organizations and movements, thus benefiting the community as a whole. Improving education during secondary school, when many are likely to lose hope, acts as a defense against violent activities and promotes the engagement in peaceful conduct that uplifts the entire community.

Over the course of two years, the Davis team worked together to develop a sustainable, evidence-based mentorship model that best serves and supports the partner secondary school students, school systems, and greater community. A few months prior to the intended commencement, the COVID-19 pandemic upended all plans of the program and fundamentally altered our project. Our plans drastically shifted as the state of education worldwide went virtual. However, our partner team possessed very limited resources and lacked the ability to transition online. With a constantly changing landscape, we were forced to be flexible in changing plans quickly.

While the core focus of the mentorship program remained, the structure through which we deliver value changed. To adapt to changing global landscapes, and aware of the disadvantaged position where Butaro lies, we shifted towards a greater emphasis on supporting the online learning capabilities for partner schools. This involved putting a greater importance on the website as a central platform for the mentorship program, including mentor-mentee gatherings and learning resources. In addition, more resources were directed towards improving and supporting school resources to engage in online learning, specifically providing critical resources for computer labs and libraries.

A majority of the time working on this project was dedicated to designing an evidence-based mentorship program. The structure is designed to create a peaceful environment to improve English language skills to be used in the classroom, while also fostering an environment within the community of a focus on academic success. At a basic level, the cohort of mentors and students will be split into teams that consist of two mentors for every 5-6 students. The idea of this is to let learners become the teachers for each other, to bring different students together with a common goal, and to show them that they are not alone.

The commencement of the program involves a mentor leadership training session in which the mentors engage in discussions around the importance of mentor roles, team-building, and peer support. They will be tasked with creating the mentor teams, an exercise that will force them to think about effective team-building. Mentors will then meet with the students twice a month, in which they will practice their English through a multimedia and group reading approach that relates to what they are learning in the classroom. Other months will be dedicated to exam preparation in advance of national examination, TOEFL, and SAT test dates. When opportunities arise, the students will get the opportunity to work on extracurricular pursuits and gain exposure to career paths and study opportunities. At the end of the school year, a banquet will be held to honor the students and highlight individual leadership and accomplishments.

Throughout the evolution of our project, we recognized that before any action, communication remained paramount. Communication was the most consistent obstacle we faced as a team to progressing the project forward. From the beginning we learned to work across time zones. However, the COVID-19 complicated planning and logistics as our team was not only spread across multiple time zones, but everyone was faced with the uncertainties the pandemic brought. A reliance on full team meetings often led to periods of lagging progress as finding times that worked for everyone was near impossible. To ensure necessary discussions were taking place, we transitioned to a more flexible schedule. This involved dividing work by country, with the occasional cross-country, full-team meeting so everyone was on the same page. The Rwanda team remains pivotal in carrying out essential tasks, such as gathering mentors and staying in touch with partner schools. Meanwhile, the US team continues to act in a supporting role, purchasing materials and designing the program. This has allowed us to continue

moving the project forward, even as some of us have been infected by COVID-19 and outbreaks have disrupted our campuses.

The program timeline has, and will continue to be, affected by the COVID-19 conditions in Rwanda. With a lack of vaccines, Rwanda is very susceptible to the spread of COVID-19. As a result, the government and decision makers are quick to enforce precautionary measures when cases rise. Two days before our planned commencement of the mentorship program, COVID cases were found in the University of Global Health Equity's campus, forcing us to postpone the leadership training session designed for the mentors. We have learned to expect disruptions in our planning and to always remember the core goals of the project when working around obstacles.

Our project remains dedicated to improving the situation in Butaro by helping students realize their strengths and the potential they have together in the community. While progress has been delayed through the summer, there can already be a noticeable change. Just from an initial presentation by Axel and Marlene, the partner schools and students are all very excited. There is a sense of optimism that comes from feeling like someone is paying attention, and we hope to drive this sentiment forward into the future. By focusing on the online education of partner schools, we expect students to become more integrated in the global learning community that may expose the youth to greater opportunities and enhanced motivation to complete school.

“This project has taught me that change is a long, non-linear process, in which genuine dedication is the most important ingredient for success. Throughout this process, I've grown close with my teammates and the most important lesson they have taught me is that, despite cultural, economic, and geographical differences, we are more similar than we are different, which is what drives our motivation to help those in need.” - Hugh McKenzie

“What we had perhaps seen as insurmountable differences in geography, situation, and background, was easily resolved through careful communication and assuming the best intent. Above all else, this project allowed us to change the perspective in which we consider aid, collaboration, and the process of change.” - Lannan Abbott

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