

## **“We Have it Within”**

United States

Princeton University

Kelton Chastulik, United States, Princeton University

<https://www.chambersburgtocollege.com/>

Over the last two years, I have absorbed so much. In 2019, when I first applied for the Davis Projects for Peace grant, I aimed to raise the civic aspirations of the youth in my home community. However, as I type this today -- raising aspirations feels like one of the lower priority items on younger adults' minds. As a country, we now have more than half of a million people who have died due to complications with COVID-19. In communities like mine, problems like food insecurity, racial injustice, blockage to healthcare and so much more have moved to the forefront of our daily lives, exacerbated by the pandemic. Entering the original project, titled “We Have it Within,” I looked out this upcoming summer wondering, what do we have left within us?

I watched, in my hometown of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, as folks began to demonstrate in the downtown square. Throughout 2020 and entering 2021, calls for younger adults to stand up and speak out rang amongst our community. Throughout social media and our local politics, we were being asked to step up. I listened to some of those calls. Beginning last summer, I was part of a small movement in my hometown to begin looking at community issues through an equity lens. I led an educational access cohort, which discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic and institutional racism/classism in my community had sectioned off opportunities for several deserving folks.

Now -- in my personal opinion, education has the power to uplift even the most defeated of people. In the community where I grew up learning that it was my effort that defined me, not the outcomes, I wanted to confirm to folks once again that we truly had something within us. In a conversation I had with some of the community's high school teachers, we learned that a major concern for educators was that students were going to miss out on so much anecdotal knowledge about college and the post-secondary pathways that are open to them. And through that conversation, I realized that it was stories that could uplift us out of this rut that we faced.

Following those conversations, I began to design and create the Chambersburg to College project, which aimed to discuss, analyze and celebrate the several different post-secondary pathways Chambersburgians have taken, in hopes of informing and inspiring students, specifically lower-income, first generation-college and first generation-American students to take the next steps towards entering college. We use several mediums to connect with the community: podcasts, first-person narratives, social media, and virtual events.

When asked to reimagine my project entering this upcoming summer, I had inaccessibility, inequity, and inaction all ahead of me. I felt that my project could do more. And in that, I wanted to reinvent the usage of this Davis grant in a way that could allow education and the stories we tell to empower the community I so deeply love to think in the same way again.

Over the summer of 2021, while using funds from the Davis Projects for Peace program, I was able to continue to expand educational access efforts in the Chambersburg community through the Chambersburg to College (C2C) project. The funds so generously provided to us made our remote project easier, more efficient, more official, and longer-term. We were able to purchase better equipment and new software so that our podcasts would sound better and to cut down on our editing times. Furthermore, I was able to pay my co-host and myself, so that we were able to focus on making a strong product, rather than having to pick up other jobs to support ourselves and our families. Since we were focused on this project throughout the summer, we were able to design bigger projects and have

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deeper, more complex conversations.

And while we were so lucky to receive these funds, we still faced several issues being remote. The two largest challenges we faced were; 1) the inability to measure our impact, outside of metrics of viewers; and 2) the inability to hold students and guests accountable. On multiple occasions, we had guests not show up for our podcasts. While at the beginning of the summer, we welcomed a student board to help create programming, by the midpoint of the summer, that all but vanished. As I reflect on the experience I had with this project being remote and done virtually, I wish that I had taken better care of the bigger goals we had.

Regardless, I have learned that where one student has walked, several more people have helped to create that pathway. Every conversation we had or story we had published meant that more and more possibilities were uncovered. In one conversation I had with a guest we had featured, it was noted how they felt their story wasn't special in any one way. I reflect on that conversation: what made that story special for that guest and our student listeners, was not the moments they faced in college or their current anxieties regarding work or life -- but that it was someone's own story. That they were from Chambersburg and had similar experiences to those who listen to our podcasts. I've learned that true stories can not be negated -- simply put, we cannot turn away the stories that people tell us.

As I leave this summer and the work carried out by the Chambersburg to College project, I feel hopeful and empowered to continue to work in the college access field and more specifically within my home community. Access to opportunity in my community is something that must be continually shaped, to bring peace to those that make our community great. Following some of the work I had done with creating the Chambersburg to College project, I applied for and accepted a role through the Pennsylvania College Advising Corps to return to the very school district that I attended, advising college-bound students on their next steps to being successful. In continuation, with funds leftover from the Davis grant, the Chambersburg to College program plans to make a large donation to the Chambersburg Area School District Foundation to be used directly for scholarships and projects relating to first-generation, lower-income student success and college access.

**Personal Statement:** “Serving my community, my hometown, and the folks who make my home so great means so very much to me. The Davis Projects for Peace Grant allowed me to amplify stories of triumph during a time where there wasn't much to celebrate... I believe strongly that I have become a better leader and community member through this opportunity.

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