

Apprenticing in Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship in the Motor City

Matthew T. A. Nash 19 October 2016

Summary

Each summer, Duke University assigns pairs of undergraduate students to work on capacity-building projects in partnership with innovative, high-impact social entrepreneurs who are tackling some of Detroit's greatest challenges. The DukeEngage Detroit program, which coordinates these connections, supports the development of change-making leaders with a clear sense of self, empathy, a willingness and ability to collaborate, an action orientation, a drive for continuous improvement, and a deep sense of accountability for their actions in the world. The program model rests on three key principles: meaningful apprenticeship, comprehensive enrichment, and critical reflection.

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A Joint Effort

DukeEngage Detroit is the result of a partnership between DukeEngage and the Duke Innovation and Entrepreneurship Initiative. The program leverages the strengths, methods, and relationships of both initiatives in delivering a high-impact experience for both students and community partners.

DukeEngage annually empowers over 400 undergraduates to address critical human needs through immersive service, in the process transforming students, advancing the university's educational mission, and providing meaningful assistance in the United States and abroad. At 40 domestic and international sites, each with its own programmatic focus, students participate in a vast range of activities on topics such as environmental advocacy, education, social justice, and economic

development. More than 3,600 students have participated since 2007, when the program was launched through gifts from the Duke Endowment and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Commissioned by Duke's board of trustees under the auspices of the provost, the Duke Innovation and Entrepreneurship Initiative seeks to "inspire and prepare all members of the [Duke] community for innovative leadership and to actively support and encourage the translation of knowledge in the service of society."¹ The initiative recently introduced an academic certificate program that requires undergraduates to complete, in addition to required courses, two immersive co-curricular experiences of at least 150 and 300 hours each. The Detroit program, launched in 2014, offers one way for students to fulfill these co-curricular requirements.

Meaningful Apprenticeship

Few learning experiences are more transformative than those that occur when students engage in immersive service alongside entrepreneurial leaders working on the front lines of social and economic change in a city like Detroit. Despite the Motor City's painful economic decline punctuated by its declaration of bankruptcy in 2013, a renewed sense of hope for revitalization has emerged, with local entrepreneurs and changemakers rolling up their sleeves to tackle the city's challenges. Incubators, accelerators, and other enabling organizations are

sprouting up to support these entrepreneurs and to harness social and venture capital in partnership with philanthropic foundations, public agencies, and civic alliances.

DukeEngage Detroit places approximately ten students in apprenticeships with innovative social enterprises that are using entrepreneurial business models to achieve positive social impact. Community partners have included:

Detroit Food Academy: "works with local educators, chefs, and business owners to inspire young Detroiters through self-directed entrepreneurial experiences rooted in food" (<http://detroitfoodacademy.com>);

Detroit Future City: works with citizens, city leadership, and key stakeholders to advance a "community-driven vision" for Detroit's next 50 years (<http://detroitfuturecity.com>);

Build Institute: helps Detroiters "turn their business ideas into reality by providing them with the necessary tools, resources, and support network" in the community (<http://buildinstitute.org>); and

TechTown Detroit: provides connections to "a broad network of resources, catalyzing entire communities of entrepreneurs best poised to energize the local economy" (<http://techtowndetroit.org>).

The program works with community partners to identify

projects that are strategically important to them, that are likely to have a beneficial impact on the community, and that involve problems that students can address in the allocated time. Before beginning their field work, students engage with their assigned community partners to further define and design their projects, ensuring clear objectives, scopes of work, and deliverables. This "contracting phase" is an important part of the student learning process.

Student teams are challenged to create significant results that the students will view as signature accomplishments when they graduate. Projects have included:

- conducting a market research and feasibility study on the expansion of a co-working space for local entrepreneurs;
- developing an online "green calculator" and field guide with resources for Detroiters to assess and improve their open-space parcels of land;
- creating a marketing strategy and an evaluation system for a summer accelerator program for aspiring college-age entrepreneurs; and
- coaching teenagers on the development of business plans for their proposed food ventures.

As they implement their projects, students are actively coached by faculty and staff from Duke's Innovation and Entrepreneurship Initiative, and they also receive advising from other faculty, alumni, and subject matter experts.

Comprehensive Enrichment

The DukeEngage Detroit program includes a comprehensive set of enrichment activities designed to advance students' professional and personal development and to familiarize them with the culture, history, and economics of Detroit. Through pre-departure gatherings, an onsite orientation, and in-service workshops, students are introduced to basic concepts and tools of social innovation and entrepreneurship, social sector consulting, project management, and related topics.

These activities are supplemented by opportunities to hear speakers and to participate in local conferences, special events, and gatherings of various networks across the city. Other field trips, tours, museum visits, and a scavenger hunt offer opportunities for students to learn more about Detroit and its culture, history, economy, and social progress while also deepening relationships with members of the community.

The program fosters connections with local Duke alumni. It also matches each student with a mentor from Venture for America (<http://ventureforamerica.org>), which places recent college graduates with startups in emerging cities, where they learn how to build a business while making an impact.

Finally, to encourage self-directed study, the program provides students with relevant readings, including books

and magazines on Detroit, periodicals on social innovation and entrepreneurship, and other readings specific to students' assigned projects.

Critical Reflection

To deepen and enhance students' learning, the program incorporates a variety of opportunities for critical reflection. Too often neglected in civic engagement and social entrepreneurship programs, reflective practice offers great potential for transformative learning.

The emphasis on critical reflection begins before students depart the university. Over 400 students from across all DukeEngage sites participate in the Fortin Foundation DukeEngage Academy, the largest student civic engagement conference of its kind. The two-day event includes interactive workshops that help students think and talk about identity. Through the renowned Barnga simulation,² students reflect upon their level of intercultural awareness in a fun, thought-provoking way.

Throughout the summer, program staff help students become more self-aware and make meaning of their experiences. For example, weekly group dinners include time for critical reflection, students have regular check-ins with staff, and required weekly blog posts prompt students to respond to specific questions. A program coordinator is on site for the entire eight weeks.

Finally, the program recently added an interactive workshop led by staff from Ask Big Questions (<http://askbigquestions.org>), which works with universities to engage students in reflective community conversations about purpose, identity, and responsibility.

Closing

Program leaders hope that the Detroit program will have positive outcomes for all stakeholders: that partner organizations will achieve progress on strategic projects leading to improved effectiveness and increased impact; that students will be better prepared and motivated to influence social and environmental problems, and will come to see Detroit as an attractive location in which to work, launch a business, or start an organization; and that relationships between the Duke and Detroit communities will be strengthened, potentially leading to other opportunities for education, research, and engagement.

Surveys of participating students and partner organizations indicate high levels of satisfaction with the program and its outcomes. For this success to continue, the three core components discussed above—meaningful apprenticeship, comprehensive enrichment, and critical reflection—must remain guiding principles.

For more information about DukeEngage Detroit, visit www.DukeEngageDetroit.org.

References

1. "Our Mission Statement," Duke Innovation and Entrepreneurship Initiative, accessed October 16, 2016, <https://entrepreneurship.duke.edu/about/mission-statement/>.
2. Sivasailam Thiagarajan and Raja Thiagarajan, Barnga: A Simulation Game on Cultural Clashes (Boston: Intercultural Press, 2006).

Author Bio

Matthew T. A. Nash is managing director of social entrepreneurship for the Duke Innovation and Entrepreneurship Initiative and visiting lecturer in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.