Problem Solvers for Nonprofits: UB Grad Students Seek Solutions That Make a Social Impact

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Being a social worker or case manager at any human service agency requires dedication, patience and, often, hours of daily research to find the right resources for individual clients with specific needs.

That means being able to answer questions at all hours, like "Does this food pantry have Halal food?" – a requirement for Muslims.

Or "Is this program equipped to serve individuals with limited English?"

So when Journey's End Refugee Services applied to a University at Buffalo program that employs teams of graduate students to solve nonprofit problems, they asked for a database of community resources designed with refugee resettlement in mind.

The dream database would not only list important resources like food and health care, but answer specific questions a refugee might ask.

Journey's End got its solution in just eight weeks, from a team of students who spent the summer working on it as UB Social Impact Fellows.

The Journey's End team – sociology doctorate candidate Ayesha Datta, master of social work candidate Ian Weeks and dual MBA/MSW candidate Arianna Wink – devised a resource-mapping system that allows case managers to pair clients with needed resources 10 times faster than before.

"In the past, a case manager might refer a client to a resource they know about, only to learn it isn't open at that time or the online information hasn't been updated," said Journey's End social worker Jessica Hernandez.

"The new filtering system the team created is like a guide for how to link somebody with a resource while being able to pare down all the possible options and find the best one based on a person's location, their insurance or even their specific health need," she said. "This is a tool that I think a lot of organizations might need to guide their case managers or direct service providers."

UB's Social Impact Fellowship, founded in 2017, puts 10 teams of three grad students to work at a Western New York nonprofit organization each summer to collaborate on helping the agencies better address social needs. Each team has a member from UB's School of Social Work, School of Management and College of Arts and Sciences.

The team won the Pitch for a Cause contest that culminates the program, garnering $2,000 for Journey's End to add digital mapping to the new refugee resource database on its **website**.

The solution is among 10 projects tackled by this year's class of 30 Social Impact Fellows and one of 60 the program has provided for 46 nonprofit agencies since it began six years ago.

Besides its direct impact on Western New York nonprofit organizations, the program could be a model for other universities seeking to address social needs, said Carrie Gardner, director of internships and experiential learning at the UB School of Management, who oversees the program.

Many universities and organizations offer "social impact fellowships" – some even charge students to participate – but most focus on the experience of working on an interdisciplinary team immersed in a nonprofit.

UB's program goes further, training its teams to use an entrepreneurial approach to nonprofits as businesses and solve a problem in only eight weeks – a "sprint" in startup parlance.

It was founded by the former deans of social work and management at UB to engage grad students across disciplines to aid their community while gaining real-life experience in collaborative problem-solving. They soon added arts and sciences fellows to increase interdisciplinary opportunities across three-person teams, Gardner said.

Gardner said the program was founded on two goals.

"First, to connect students to the nonprofit community and help them understand how their academic background can contribute to the nonprofit sector," she said. "Because a healthy economy can only happen in a healthy community."

Second, "We want to teach students to respect other points of view, because you cannot move forward to solve a problem without having respect for other people and their approach," she said.

Once each school accepts 10 grad students, it's "a labor of love" to form the teams and assign projects, collected via Request for Proposals from different nonprofits each year, Gardner said. The students receive $5,000 stipends funded through UB's President's Fund for Excellence and other donations.

This year's projects included helping Goodwill Industries of WNY pursue zero waste in its secondhand apparel operations, a business plan for Resources and Help Against Marital Abuse to open a bakery in East Buffalo, and the feasibility of Erie County Social Services offering chair massages and life coaching to stressed-out parents facing family court.

The summer starts with an intensive three-day course that requires fellows to ditch preconceived notions about people from different disciplines or backgrounds and focus on what's best for the organization, Gardner said.

"You want to create an environment where people feel valued and free to offer their input and have respect for others, respect for the nonprofits and respect for the individuals they serve," she said.

The Journey's End team laughingly said they were in a state of constant disagreement while creating the refugee resource database, even though they all hit it off right away.

Ayesha Datta came to UB from India to pursue her doctorate in sociology in 2021. Ian Weeks came from Northern California to pursue a master's in social work. Arianna Wink of Canandaigua chose UB's dual MSW/MBA program because of the Social Impact Fellowship and UB's many opportunities for entrepreneurial training.

Datta said she and Wink consistently brought different ideas to the table and shared a tendency to "argue for them passionately," while Weeks served as a mild-mannered mediator. At the end of the day, Wink was Datta's ride home from Journey's End, where disagreements dissolved into jokes and laughter.

"The best part of our team is that we tackle one thing really well and then move on to the next," Wink said.

They made their database by dividing resources to research – first health care, vision and dental, then 84 food pantries – and made dozens of calls to flesh out a spreadsheet of 270 resources with far more specific and up-to-date information than is available through broad-based services like 211 WNY.

They created a Google locator map with filters for health, child care and food, and a Google form case managers can use to update the data with any changes they encounter.

They tested their solution by timing how long it took 15 to 20 case managers to locate services with and without it. The average time to find one resource was 10 minutes without the system and 45 seconds with it.

That's one problem solved for one agency, Gardner said. As it looks to expand to other UB schools, the Social Impact Fellowship has anecdotal proof that "it works," she said.

"At the end of every session, we do an intensive evaluation that includes asking the organizations if they are going to implement the team's recommendations, and overwhelmingly they say yes," she said.

The program's next goal is to better measure social impact with a long-term study of how the projects benefit the agencies and the causes they serve, she said. Maybe a future team of fellows can tackle that one.

Datta said that besides making an impact on Journey's End, what she did last summer made a big impact on her.

"The idea of going into an organization to solve a pressing problem in eight weeks was very intriguing to me," she said. "Getting to work with a multidisciplinary team to use your skills and learn from others to solve a specific problem, that was life changing."