

Big Ideas@Berkeley Project Mentors: Cultivating Student Ideas



Financial Literacy Contest Co-mentors Sean Burns and Variny Paladino give the thumbs up to Big Ideas at the Final Round Info Session held on January 25, 2013

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BERKELEY-- With final project proposals submitted to the Big Ideas@Berkeley contest, student teams are now playing the waiting game. Thankfully, they are not alone. Behind nearly every student seeking up to \$300,000 in seed funding is a project mentor, proud of them yet anxiously awaiting behind the scenes to hear the judges' decision. "Many years from now, I look forward to these students returning to Cal as guest speakers, to talk about how [their project] started here at UCB, eventually spanning the globe," said Dave Williams, the mentor for a team competing in the Financial Literacy category. "I'm certain every mentor feels this way about their students, but my group is amazing!" he added.

The mentorship component in Big Ideas is central to the contest's mission of providing an ecosystem for social innovation. Fifty-four teams were given the opportunity to be matched with an industry, university, or non-profit mentor with years of experience and insight. Williams brings a career of experience in financial literacy as UC Berkeley's Assistant Director of Financial Aid in charge of the work-study program. Previously, he developed the campus' Job Opportunity (JobOp) program and advised the facilitators of a personal finance DeCal course. Williams, however, looks to students for innovations in financial literacy. "Students ask 'Why not?' when it comes to new ideas, on any issues, social or otherwise," explained Williams.

Mentor Jen Lyons, 1996 Haas MBA and life-long teacher, encouraged her team to break new ground. Acknowledging the importance of fresh ideas, Lyons saw her role as a mentor and an ally "who knows the realities and structural hurdles the students are likely to encounter." She added that mentors "are particularly valuable in helping the students communicate their ideas in a compelling way." In essence, Lyons believes the mentorship component of Big Ideas brings together fresh innovation with the skills that only come from experience to craft inventive, but plausible, ideas.





First time mentor Variny Paladino, who among her many qualifications has served as Regional Director of Western States for the Jumpstart Coalition for Personal Finance, agrees that students have a particularly innovative perspective to contribute to increasing financial literacy. “They were able to take their own life experiences with money, student loans, and debt and address why students need to learn about finances prior to coming to college,” explained Paladino, who has worked in the field of financial education and literacy for the last decade.

Paladino, along with Director of Student Programs for the Global Poverty and Practice minor, Sean Burns, mentored a project that uses technology, mobile devices, and interactive games to engage high school students in financial education. Regardless of the contest results, many mentors consider the mentorship experience a reward in itself. “I loved, loved every minute of being a mentor!” exclaimed Paladino. “Berkeley students are brilliant, fun, and dynamic... the minute I met the students, they won me over with their creativity, diligence, and sheer hard work.”

Student contestants consistently express how they have profoundly benefited from the mentorship program within Big Ideas. “Dave taught us to think outside the box,” explained Virginia Chung, a Big Ideas contestant. Chung’s project started as a campus initiative, but after Dave pointed to the failings of methods already being employed, Chung realized that her project could fill a much larger need outside the university. “Once we stopped thinking as students but as entrepreneurs, we were able to broaden our project and form partnerships with business, social organizations and financial institutions,” Chung reflected. This process of growing ideas throughout the Big Ideas contest period is a critical component of the program. Students aren’t expected to have fully formed ideas at the start of the contest in November; they are simply expected to have the drive, creativity, and ingenuity to collaboratively grow an idea.

Through the idea development process, the mentors experience the regeneration that comes with fresh perspectives but also, importantly, build relationships with life-long friends and future colleagues. For some mentors, even their children got in on the experience. Recounting an instance when the only time she could meet with a team was on a Sunday evening, Paladino remembers having to bring her two children (ages 8 and 12) along. “My kids were so excited to come on campus to ‘hang out’ with real college students! In the end, the Berkeley students became role models for my children.”

These four amazing mentors represent only a small fraction of the dynamic and intergenerational ecosystem of Big Ideas. Stay tuned for more stories from the Big Ideas Grand Prize Pitch Day on April 25th and the Big Ideas Award Celebration on May 5th. For more details, check out bigideas.berkeley.edu.