

The Next Ones Up Initiative: Mentorship for Community Reform
Tucson, Arizona | June 6th, 2023– July 31st, 2023
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The “American Dream” does not exist in my hometown of Tucson, Arizona. Tucson is a tale of two cities, with River Road dividing high-income, high-opportunity families from those that are middle to lower class. In 2018, the wealthiest 20% of households in Pima county (Greater Tucson Area) received more than half of the county's total income. The poorest 20% earned 3% of the county's income.¹ This economic disparity highlights how some children in Tucson receive systemic advantages to be financially successful and safe, while other children are forced to struggle to provide for themselves and their families for the rest of their lives, solely based on where they live. This is modern-day residential segregation. Those that live north of River Road have far higher chances of success and opportunities than those who live south of this road. This inequality is exacerbated when examining the education in Tucson in particular and Arizona as a whole. Arizona's public education ranks 46th in the country, and the greater Tucson area's high school graduation rate is just 71%, well behind the national average of 86% by 15%.²

Tucson, Arizona is a challenging place to call home, but an equally challenging place to leave. The city has experienced seemingly endless cycles of poverty, crime, and drug abuse, which is compounded by a lack of mentorship opportunities for youth. I have seen these problems negatively impact friends and family members, at times leading to death.

There is a dire need for support, guidance, and education in Tucson's high-risk, low-opportunity neighborhoods and for mentorship that positively impacts young lives. In partnership with local non-profits such as the Boys and Girls Clubs of Tucson, corporate partners such as Axon Enterprise, businesses like the Ruckus Room, and community leaders, I intend to assemble a cohort of 12 students aged 11-14 for an eight-week educational program centered around mentorship and community reformation. Mentors will be local business owners and professionals from diverse backgrounds who can empathize with the struggles our students face. The goal of the program is to open new doors of opportunity, to educate students on how they can effect change in their respective neighborhoods, to equip them with life skills, and to match them with mentors of their choosing. By educating and serving as a support system that connects youth with local leaders, we aspire to break cycles of poverty, violence, and drug abuse – one fellow at a time.

Project Details

The Next Ones Up Initiative (NOUI) strives to educate our fellows to realize their changemaking potential by pairing fellows with mentors in their areas of interest and helping fellows shape a vision for their future(s). Our program will inspire fellows to dream big and to create an action plan to achieve those dreams. Our project-based learning model will enable fellows to freely navigate and take principles from our curriculum and apply them to multiple disciplines.

Once fellows complete our application process and are selected to join the program, each student will undergo an orientation that guides them on topics they may want to address, provides them with a blueprint of what their summer experience entails, and introduces them to an array of final project ideas. The curriculum includes weekly guest speakers, professional development workshops, tailored curriculum modules, and mentor matches for each student. The experience culminates with a final project in which fellows inspire change in their neighborhoods by identifying a root cause and working towards a solution. For example, if a student's school has low reading scores on standardized tests, they might consider making a free neighborhood library stand. Alternatively, if a student is passionate about using sports as a vehicle for social justice, we might help them set up a small tournament that connects groups from diverse backgrounds over a shared love of athletics. Overall, we hope to guide our fellows in taking a positive step towards the future, shield fellows from negative influences, and surround fellows with like-minded, motivated individuals, ultimately nurturing leaders that create a domino effect of change in the city of Tucson.

NOUI will be an eight-week, in-person program taking place in classrooms at one of our partner organizations, The Dunbar Center. The Dunbar Center, which I frequented when I was younger, is an African American arts & culture center with the stated mission of helping to shape the future of the African American community. Their central location provides essential convenience for fellows and their families, as our fellows will be coming from different neighborhoods spread throughout Tucson. This geographic

¹ 2014-2018 Census Bureau Data

² Map AZ [Dashboard](#)

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diversity is essential to fostering a sense of community and to building friendships among fellows that might not ordinarily interact.

Fellows will improve their writing skills over the summer and, after drafting a mini-proposal, fellows will receive a grant to aid in the execution of their final project. We will provide meals from local businesses and plan to meet three times per week. Fellows will have a body of work to show, including tailored education modules, professional workshops, an established relationship with their mentor, a better sense of the problems they experience in their neighborhoods, and an idea of how to solve them.

After the completion of our eight-week summer program, fellows will be inducted into our alumni network to keep fellows up to date on community news and opportunities, and to encourage fellows to have monthly check-ins with their mentors. We will also encourage fellows to maintain relationships within the cohort as they become emerging leaders of Tucson. In future years, we plan to invite fellows back to serve as mentors for incoming cohorts and, ultimately, hope to offer paid internship summer positions. Once established and fully flourishing, we plan to offer our summer program annually and to have a permanent office space in Tucson to house and operate our programming.

Expected Timeline

January - February: These months will be used to finalize learning modules, secure guest speakers, and finalize logistics for our application process. Additionally, we will be using the funding to create a website that will provide background information about who we are, our mission statement, information about the summer program, and a link to the application portal.

March - April: Begin working with local middle schools, club sports programs, after-school programs, and other nonprofit organizations to market NOUI. We will also open the application process and select fellows by the end of April.

May-June: Begin communications with our cohort and finalize dates and scheduling. Host virtual information sessions with cohort members and families and cover summer expectations.

June-July: Host the NOUI summer program and help implement students' final projects.

July- Onwards: Begin taking steps towards making NOUI an official 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and create a playbook for future projects and future partners.

Positionality

Growing up in Tucson as a first-generation, low-income college student, I have an enormous sense of gratitude for the sacrifices my mentors and role models have made and for the countless doors they have opened for me. I now realize that I owe it to those figures to pay it forward by fostering the same relationships with the youth in my community. Through my extensive volunteer experience with the YMCA and adjacent Tucson-area non-profits and my recent corporate experience with Axon Enterprise's Community Impact team (researching, contacting, and working with grassroots organizations across the United States), I am uniquely positioned to kick-start this initiative. My work will begin in Cambridge, Massachusetts this spring and I will return to Tucson as soon as classes end to ensure we are prepared by our start date.

Expected Outcomes and Sustainability

By the conclusion of our program, we hope that fellows are set on a positive path toward a promising future away from the harmful influences that too often take our loved ones. Along with a new mentor that will be endowed to serve, fellows will have leadership, problem-solving, entrepreneurship, and effective communication skills that they will use for the rest of their life. Fellows will come away with a roadmap that they can utilize to guide them on the path to their athletic, economic, educational, and career goals. We will aid fellows in researching high schools in the Tucson area and the pros and cons of attending based on factors ranging from the quality of athletic programs to specialized theatre and fine arts programs. Fellows will be introduced to colleges and will come away with a dream list that they plan to aim for. Fellows will have a modified version of a resume where they can track their accomplishments, summer activities, and grades and will be asked to keep it up to date. The sustainability of this project lies in the hope that we establish the NOUI as a non-profit organization that will be maintained and can aid students at any time of the year, not only during the summer. In our future, for example, we envision quarterly initiatives surrounding different topics ranging from SAT preparation to weekly community health discussions in Tucson's food deserts. I am certain that in the future, this initiative will cultivate leaders, serve as a safe space for youth from all backgrounds and identities, and inspire change-makers for years to come.

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