Our Conversation with Jiakun Xu and Xin Tong Lim

Jiakun Xu and Xin Tong Lim began their social venture after completing their independent DukeEngage project in Nagarkot, Nepal the summer after freshman year. While in Nagarkot for DukeEngage, Jiakun and Xin Tong taught English at Shree Janakalyan Lower Secondary School. While they were there, they noticed most of the kids did not have anything to eat during the lunch break and realized that it was an issue they could really help to address.

Upon returning to Duke, Xin Tong and Jiakun began Project Sapana to provide free lunches at the school. Sapana means dream in Nepali and Project Sapana is based on the belief that every child should have a chance to pursue his or her dreams. With access to lunches at school everyday, students will be more motivated to attend school regularly and be able to focus better in class. In addition to founding Project Sapana, Xin Tong is studying Psychology and completing the Teacher Preparation Program. Jiakun is studying Economics and Global Health.

Duke I&E: How did you come up with the independent DukeEngage project?

Xin Tong: When I was in high school I did a shorter community service project at the same school. I was there for about two weeks and told myself I would go back. I felt like the DukeEngage independent project was a really good opportunity for me to return because I could choose my community partner and set up everything I wanted to do.

Jiakun: I had not been to the school before our DukeEngage project, but I went to a few other schools in Thailand and Vietnam. You always get the feeling, when you go for a short trip, you don’t get to do much that is lasting or make much of an impact. So for pretty much the same reason, I wanted to go somewhere that I could establish a long-term connection.

Duke I&E: Have you had any other experiences or classes at Duke that helped shape Project Sapana?

Jiakun: The semester before our DukeEngage project, we both took Education 101 because we were interested in it and we knew that we were going to teach at the school. We wanted some background and some knowledge about how we should go about doing it. Also, we both tutored in Durham.

Xin Tong: My freshman year I was in the focus class, Knowledge in the Service of Society, and that is where I met Dr. Riggsbee. She is the director of Duke TeachHouse and helped us a lot with lesson plans and teaching materials. She has been very supportive the whole way. We’re just getting connected with the I&E initiative at Duke. We met with Matt Nash for the first time last week. We’ve approached some other faculty as well.
Duke I&E: How are you hoping Duke I&E, particularly Social Entrepreneurship at Duke, can help move Project Sapana forward?

Jiakun: Hopefully, we can get something like a farm or garden started by the end of this year. And then that can go on the road to self-sustainability. I think our biggest concern right now is how they’re going to sustain this in the future. It is not very practical for us to keep raising funds from friends and international sources, and we don’t want to keep going that way either. But, we want to make sure we keep getting these lunches so that the students keep coming to school. We’re hoping to get the local community involved, including families and creating partnerships with local markets and hotels.

Xin Tong: We hope that it will become self-sustainable. We’ll keep working with the community until they have the capacity to fund the program themselves.

Duke I&E: Do you have any advice for other undergraduate students who are interested in pursuing their own social ventures?

Xin Tong: Reaching out to faculty has been very helpful for me. Sometimes, it seems like they are too busy and doing such great things, but many of them have been so willing to help when I’ve reached out to them personally. This has been very encouraging for me.

Jiakun: Sometimes, when you’re so involved in a project, you lose perspective of the things you need to think about. When you talk to faculty, they ask the questions that get you thinking about what you really need to think about.

For more information, visit the Project Sapana Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/projectsapana) or Indiegogo campaign (http://igg.me/at/project-sapana).

If you would like to get involved, feel free to reach out to Xin Tong, xin.tong.lim@duke.edu, or Jiakun, jiakun.xu@duke.edu.